

BOOK REVIEW

FAITH AND THE STATE: A HISTORY OF ISLAMIC PHILANTHROPY IN INDONESIA

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What is the relationship between civil society and the state? Amelia Fauzia undertakes this question through the lens of Islamic philanthropy in Indonesia. Charting a history of this relationship during three distinct periods—the pre-modern Islamic monarchy, Dutch colonial rule, and the modern secular state—Fauzia shows that the inverse relationship between civil society and the state has affected philanthropic activities in the country. Namely, when the state is weak, civil society—and thus philanthropy—thrives. When the state is powerful on the other hand, civil society and its corollary philanthropy operates in a more modest way.

Faith and the State is divided into three parts. Part One (Chapters 1 and 2) gives an overview of *zakat* (alms-giving) management and *waqf* (endowments) and how these institutions gradually became independent of the state throughout the Islamic world. Focusing on Indonesia during the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries, Fauzia alleges that there was no uniform relationship between the state and civil society; the relationship was largely dependent on the nature of the ruler. Overall, the Muslim monarchs played a relatively small role in managing the philanthropic activities of its populace. Independent actors, including local religious leaders, *sufi tariqas*, and mosques, played a more dominant role.

Part Two (Chapters 3 and 4) traces the practices of philanthropy during Dutch colonial rule. During this time, we see both a strong state and a strong civil society. While one would expect a strong colonial power to stifle on-the-ground movements, the opposite was true in Indonesia. Faith-based philanthropic activity was allowed, as long as these activities did not undermine colonial power. While the Dutch were suspicious of movements that sought to overthrow them, they nevertheless avoided interfering in the philanthropic activities of their Muslim subjects. This section of the book seems to contradict Fauzia's central thesis *prima facie* (i.e. the inverse relationship between the state and civil society). But upon closer examination, we see that this relationship is complex and must also take into consideration its historical and political context. Islamic philanthropy can actually become stronger under the domain of civil society when a strong state recuses itself from involvement in religious matters. Overall, Fauzia's assessment of Dutch colonial rule is a nuanced interpretation that draws the reader to reexamine if and how a strong state and civil society can function simultaneously. It would be interesting to see more studies on the relationship between colonial powers and civil society with regards to religious philanthropy. Fauzia's nuanced approach provides a unique pathway for further research in this area.

Part Three (Chapters 5 and 6) ends with a discussion on Islamic Philanthropy after Independence. The state, now under Muslim rule, began to take a greater interest in the management of Islamic philanthropy, though its approach was again far from uniform. As Fauzia writes, with regards to the state vis-à-vis religion, the state fell “somewhere between the ideological and the indifferent” (Fauzia, 2013, p. 7). As we saw with the early Muslim monarchs, a stronger state often correlated with a weaker civil society. This time however, the state faced competition from the NGOs which had been operating relatively independently since colonial rule. Even though Islamist Muslims have sought to intensify state control of *zakat*, most urban Muslims continue to give *zakat* privately. How successfully either the state or civil society manages philanthropy remains unclear at the end of the book. But what is clear is that there remains a tension between the two sectors that will inevitably continue.

One problematic aspect of the book are the author’s definitions of certain key words. While Fauzia’s main argument is the contestation between the Indonesian state and civil society, “faith” might be too overreaching for the purposes of this book, which focuses on religiously based institutions. Although the beliefs and practices of the individuals who make up these organizations undoubtedly play a role, it is misleading to use the word “faith” because the beliefs and practices of Indonesians not affiliated with these organizations are not included. Another problem is that Fauzia’s definition of “philanthropy” might be too limiting. She uncritically adopts a Euro-centric notion, defining it as “voluntary activities of private giving and service for the public good” (Fauzia, 2013, p. 16). Shariq Siddiqui has argued that to fully understand Islamic philanthropy, we must unchain ourselves from the western conception of philanthropy. Under the definition that Fauzia adopts, *zakat* could not be a category of study, even though it is the primary focus of the book. Regardless of state enforcement, for practicing Muslims *zakat* is not a voluntary act. Furthermore, what is considered the “public good” is often contested. We see this contestation come to the fore when Fauzia discusses the struggles for independence during colonial rule. Indonesians considered these activities as serving the public good, but the Dutch obviously did not. Who then gets to decide what the “public good” is?

In addition, while the contestations between different non-state actors plays an important role in the state-civil society relationship, the labels of these different actors (Modernist, Islamist, Revivalist, or Traditionalist) are sometimes hard to follow. While the distinction of the Traditionalists is clearer, the distinctions between the Modernists, Islamists, and Revivalists (the latter two often lumped together) are less so. Another issue is the simplistic division of Muslims either as Traditionalist, Modernist, or Revivalist. Do all Traditionalists view faith as a private matter and therefore inveigh against the state’s involvement in managing *zakat*? Are all those who would wish to manage their own philanthropy Traditionalists? Are all Revivalists promoters of the state’s involvement in managing philanthropy? In the reverse, are all those who promote the state’s involvement Revivalist? Without a careful examination of the individuals who make up these different definitions, we do not really know.

Studies on Islamic philanthropy as a whole have tended to focus on its theological dimensions. *Faith and State* charts news territory by focusing more on practice. The book is an admirable attempt to bridge the divide between theory and practice. Fauzia sought to write a “new history” by engaging perspectives from non-political actors. I applaud her effort.

References

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