

# ZAKAT AS PRACTICAL THEODICY: PRECARITY AND THE CRITIQUE OF GENDER IN MUSLIM INDIA

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*The obligatory “alms-tax” of zakat constitutes an enduring site for exploring the intersection of Islam and society. This ethnographic case study of a contemporary zakat foundation in India traces how zakat occasions the experimental formation of Islamic social ethics, including a critique of gender. Donors of zakat attempt to move beyond merely helping the poor through the redistribution of resources. They reconfigure the giving of zakat to affect the structural conditions of poverty by generating a counter-cultural critique of the practice of giving dowry. Such efforts disclose how zakat can function as a practical theodicy, a way to counter the normalized evil of assigned disposability. By encouraging reflexivity and responsiveness, the obligation to distribute zakat becomes framed as a way to disrupt precarity.*

*Keywords: zakat, gender, Islamic ethics, social ethics, Muslim minority, India, dowry, education, poverty, precarity*

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## Introduction

As one of the five “pillars” of Islam, zakat stands as a primary religious obligation that all Muslims should fulfill.<sup>1</sup> Annually giving a portion of one’s wealth as zakat constitutes a significant moral action that brings about religious, material, and social effects. In theological terms, giving zakat is a pious action, an unambiguous gesture of doing what is right and has been commanded by God. As an obligatory practice, zakat affirms the piety of the giver, and marks her or him as a righteous person, yet zakat affects not just the giver but also her or his wealth. According to tradition, zakat functions to “purify” the donor’s remaining wealth and property, and thus giving zakat also sanctions material prosperity (Zysow, 2002, p. 407). In the social realm, the giving and receiving of zakat binds people to each other, reminding them that human well-being is ultimately linked, collective, and sustained through mutual support and recognition. These multiple effects of zakat work together, simultaneously, to make zakat a nexus between piety and sociality.

By ritualizing the transfer of wealth, zakat incorporates the reallocation of resources into the ongoing formation of Islamic tradition. Zakat works through the logic of redistribution to transfer resources from

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<sup>1</sup> Zakat is an obligation that some have described as an “alms-tax.” It is distinguished from spontaneous charitable gifts (*sadaqa*). Contemporary calculations among Sunnis often set the amount of zakat at 2.5% percent of wealth above a minimum threshold (*nisab*) that has been held for more than a lunar year. Along with capital assets and cash, agriculture and livestock are also “zakatable” at rates varying from 5% to 20%. Many Islamic organizations offer online zakat calculators; zakat calculator apps are also available for mobile devices. Obligatory charity in Shia traditions differs in some respects from that in Sunni traditions. For descriptive accounts of obligatory giving in contemporary Shia communities, see Widmann Abraham, D. (2017). You can’t be human alone: Philanthropy and social giving in Muslim communities. In E. Curtis (Ed.), *The practice of Islam in America: An introduction* (pp. 209–231). New York, NY: New York University Press; Blank, J. (2001). *Mullahs on the mainframe: Islam and modernity among the Daudi Bohras*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press; Keshavjee, R. (1998). *Mysticism and the plurality of meaning: The case of the Ismailis of rural Iran*. London, UK: The Institute of Ismaili Studies; Jones, J., & Qasmi, A. (2015). *The Shia in modern South Asia: Religion, history, and politics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; Loeffler, R. (1988). *Islam in practice: Religious beliefs in a Persian village*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press; Nanji, A. (1978). *The Nizārī Ismā’īlī tradition in the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent*. New York, NY: Caravan Books; Poor, D. (2014) *Authority without territory: The Aga Khan Development Network and the Ismaili imamate*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

those who have surplus to those who are in need. Insofar as zakat is given to those who are vulnerable—orphans and the destitute, among others—it functions as a strategy of collective protection and communal integration. Ideally, zakat tightens the weave of the social fabric by repairing any fissures. According to traditional explication, both donors, who are thriving, and recipients, who are not, are necessary in the practice of giving zakat and the purification of wealth. Zakat thus subsumes social inequality into a relationship that has a sacred function in spreading divine bounty.

Zakat constitutes an enduring site for the continual, ongoing reproduction of Islamic tradition in society. In the contemporary period, zakat has been embraced by those who “[seek] an idiom of transformation” for projects of social and moral guidance (Liu, 2012, p. 152). The following case study of the Hyderabad Zakat and Charitable Trust in India traces how one zakat project shifted from giving to the poor to attempting to redress poverty itself. This shift instigated an experimental attempt to reform gender through zakat, one that focuses on the countercultural resistance to dowry. This case study begins with a brief overview of approaches to zakat, and then moves to analyze material from my ethnographic study of the Hyderabad Zakat and Charitable Trust’s experiments with giving zakat to confront poverty.<sup>2</sup>

In the efforts of the Trust, zakat emerges as a critical site for the reconstruction of Islamic gender ethics. A description of the Trust’s distinctive practice is followed by an analysis that argues that zakat can be understood as a practical theodicy: as zakat occasions reflexivity and responsiveness, it becomes a vehicle for shaping practical efforts to limit precarity and to reject human disposability. Judith Butler (2009) defines precarity as follows:

*...that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death. Such populations are at heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection. Precarity also characterizes that*

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My field research was carried out in Hyderabad and the surrounding areas over 18 months in 2005 and 2006. The ethnographic material in this case study comes from participant observation, as well as from semi-structured interviews. Quotations from interviews come from transcribed conversations that involved a mix of Urdu and English. The names of my interlocutors have been changed in order to protect their privacy.

*politically induced condition of maximum vulnerability for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence and to other forms of aggression that are not enacted by states and against which states do not offer adequate protection. (p. ii)*

Butler's definition of precarity emphasizes its political nature. It is a condition of vulnerability and exposure to injury and violence that is neither natural nor inevitable, but rather results from policy and social failure. This case study of obligatory Islamic alms among Muslims in India follows Butler by situating precarity within the social field—the domain in which the structures of precarity take root, and the domain in which the transformation of those structures becomes possible. This case study shows how a local project of zakat becomes configured as an ethical response to precarity.

This analysis presents a new way of understanding the traditional practice of zakat by showing that it can be seen in terms of a contemporary Islamic theodicy. In making this shift, it is worth noting the place of theodicy in Islamic tradition. The Qur'an describes God as "powerful over everything" (Quran 2:20). From the early period of Islam, Muslim thinkers sought to present formulations of divine power, goodness, and justice that encompassed the question of evil. Theologian and mystic Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111 CE) articulated the dilemma of reflecting on the reality of evil in the world:

*We see the world teeming with evils, disasters and abominations, such as thunderbolts, earthquakes, floods and beasts of prey. So, too, in human souls: lust, wrath and the like. How does evil issue from God? Is it by decree, or not? If not, then something is beyond God's power and will. . . . If so, then how can He who is sheer goodness ordain evil? (Ormsby, 1984, p. 25)*

Muslim theologians, influenced by Greek philosophy, had been working over such questions for centuries by the time German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz (d. 1716) formalized the term theodicy to describe "the attempt to demonstrate that divine justice remains uncompromised by the manifold evils of existence" (Ormsby, 1984).<sup>3</sup> So prior to the

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<sup>3</sup> Leibniz presented theodicy in specifically Christian terms, and predicated his exposition on a rejection of what he called "Mahometan fatalism." To be clear, it is indeed likely that there was, in fact, a group of Muslims who were fatalist if only because fatalism is part of the historical experience of humanity and thus

crystallization of the term in European philosophy, theodicy as a domain of theological reflection had long been a part of Islamic tradition. This article extends Islamic theodicy by chronicling contemporary reflections on the problem of evil in the context of zakat distribution in Muslim India.

## Approaches to Zakat

Although the collection and distribution of zakat has varied in different historical periods and geographical regions, the practice of zakat dates from the Prophet Muhammad's lifetime. In the Qur'an, "the commandment to give zakat is so often joined with the commandment to offer prayer (*salat*) that zakat was later termed the 'companion' (*karina*) to prayer" (Zysow, 2002, p. 407). Zakat thus stands as a foundational Muslim practice: an embodiment of belief and a confirmation of belonging to the community of believers. In addition to asserting the obligatory and meritorious nature of zakat, the Qur'an specifies the categories of persons considered to be legitimate recipients: the poor, the indigent, agents who collect zakat, those whose hearts are to be won over, those who are enslaved that they might be liberated, those ridden with debt, those in the path of God, and travelers (Qur'an 9:60). Other sources of tradition explicate the details of how the obligation to give zakat should be fulfilled and clarify the parameters of its collection and distribution. Since the earliest period of Islamic history, the obligation of zakat has been conjoined with devotion and worship and was organized by community leaders as a way of ensuring collective responsibility for those within the Muslim community.

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carries over into various religious traditions. But such a fatalist faction was only part of the broader and rich reflection on theodicy in Islamic history. Rather than recognizing the complex philosophical exploration of evil and divine goodness in Islamic thought, Leibniz created a caricature of Muslims as people of "lazy reason" who turned to notions of "inevitable fate" so they could "relieve" themselves of "the need to reason properly." Leibniz, G. (2009). *Theodicy: Essays on the goodness of God, the freedom of man, and the origin of evil*. (E. M. Huggard, Trans.) New York, NY: Cosimo Classics. (Original work published 1710). p. 55. This means that the concept of theodicy was formulated in European philosophy in part by furthering Orientalist tropes of Muslims as people of faulty or failed religion and limited rationality, in contrast to Christians whose religion and rationality were held up as ideal. This article rejects such Orientalist framing and uses theodicy in its more expansive descriptive sense to refer to diverse religious responses to questions of evil and divine justice.

Contemporary religious thinkers have elaborated on traditional understandings of zakat, linking it to the religious imagination of Islam in modernity. They identify zakat as a practice with enough symbolic power and social relevance to counteract a variety of modern challenges, from colonialism to the reconfiguration of Islamic authority vis-à-vis the nation-state. In earlier periods of Islamic history, zakat was collected by agents appointed by rulers, yet from about the year 1100 CE, “governmental collection of zakat across the Muslim world had become largely a thing of the past” (Zysow, 2002, p. 410). Although a few Muslim-majority countries have compulsory zakat collection, such as Malaysia, Pakistan, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia, in most contemporary societies, zakat is given by individuals or collected by various intermediaries such as local religious leaders, Sufi orders, and charitable foundations (Zysow, 2002, p. 419). This open framework allows zakat to emerge as a site for the creative reconfiguration of Islam in modernity. The twentieth century marked a “shift from regarding zakat primarily as an act of piety (an attitude that still exists in some circles) to the emphasis on zakat as the foundation of the Islamic social and economic system,” and this view “dominates its modern revival” (Zysow, 2002, p. 418). Reformers such as Rashid Rida (d. 1935 CE), for example, “urged that the class of ‘slaves’ might now include not only individuals but societies ‘enslaved’ by colonialism and that the zakat for the ‘path of God’ should go, not to a jihad waged with arms, but to one waged with the weapons of argument and persuasion in the interest of the restoration of Islam” (Zysow, 2002, p. 418). The interpretation of zakat as a locus of socio-religious reform has also been taken up by prominent clerics such as Yusuf Qaradawi (1975), who argues that the correct practice of zakat can redistribute wealth among the Muslim community and thereby remedy a host of evils, from endemic poverty and corruption to the reliance on government subsidies from the West. Such reformist discourse does not offer a detailed political strategy of poverty alleviation, but rather it presents zakat within a broad project of asserting that Islamic practices and institutions provide a sufficient foundation for shaping modern Muslim societies.

As part of the project of modern social reform, zakat occasions a discourse about how best to live morally in a world complicated by dangerous imbalances of power. When seen in this light, zakat authenticates attempts at social change by framing them in terms of values and practices that can be seen as authentically “Islamic.” For some of those wrestling with the question of socio-religious reform, “the poor economic and political performance of postcolonial Muslim states has led to a rising critique by Muslim scholars among whom the concepts

of an Islamic state, Islamic economics, and zakat take a central position in their argumentation” (Weiss, 2002, p. 2). Zakat thus constitutes one element in a constellation of possibilities that could enable a society to bring Islamic modernity into being and connects economic thought to the politics of a legitimate state. Positioned in this way, zakat links society to broad Islamic ideals. Among Islamists, who desire to “bring Islam into every aspect of human life, political, social, economic, and cultural,” the administration of zakat affirms claims of religio-political legitimacy (Hodgkin, 1998, p. 198). For Muslims who believe that the state should be secular, zakat still stands as an important practice for realizing crucial religious commitments, including that of social justice. Across diverse modern orientations of Islam, from Islamists to reformists to secularists, zakat enables responses to social challenges to carry the sanction of tradition.

In his essay on zakat and the question of social welfare, Holger Weiss (2002) argues that zakat is best understood through the lens of “an applied model to be implemented among Muslim societies . . . namely the establishment of an Islamic order within the Muslim community but without the Islamisation of the state” (p. 36). Weiss’s helpful focus on efforts to establish an Islamic order allows us to explore how people formulate a public commons for collective life, what dimensions of human life are seen to be important in an Islamic social order, and who is included therein. Weiss’s model, it should be noted, raises two crucial questions: What constitutes an Islamic order? And what are the means of marking belonging in the Muslim community? Certainly, notions of an Islamic order as being that which brings about the collective good for Muslims are profoundly diverse and contested. Similarly, there is no universal agreement about the boundaries of belonging that make the Muslim community, if such a singularity can be assumed. In practical terms, discourse about “the Muslim community” references diverse fields of concern, ideas of mutual care and responsibility, and opinions about what constitutes justice. It is an ideal that can convey a variety of desires for collective life. For some, it opens up ways of talking about and redressing exclusion and supports attempts to make suffering publicly actionable. For others, it can be a means of political consolidation.

For Weiss, the institutional framework of zakat collection shapes the diversity of its practice. Zakat is characterized by its administrative infrastructure, whether it is compulsory or voluntary, and whether it is given to a state agency, a social welfare effort, or a Sufi order. This view emphasizes the collection of zakat while leaving open questions about its distribution. While not diminishing the importance of

the institutional framework for zakat collection, this case study demonstrates that the distribution of zakat is worthy of further study, for it is in distribution that different notions of well-being, Islamic social order, and ethics are communicated and contested in lived human relationships.

We see in the distribution of zakat that people make highly contextual decisions that enable them to fulfill the Quranic mandate to care for those who are vulnerable and suffering. The Quranic categories of zakat recipients include people who experience contingent hardship and distinct forms of suffering, such as those who are indigent, whose lack of food and necessities puts their very survival in question. The context-bound choices made in identifying recipients, the methods of transfer, and the interactions (or lack thereof) between zakat donors and recipients can reveal much about how suffering, mutuality, and well-being is understood in lived Islam. Whether zakat is given to a man who is the head of a poor family or whether it is given to a single mother; whether it is given to a person who is raising an orphaned child or to an orphanage; whether it is given to someone who is identified as poor by a local imam or by a government census; whether it is given to a person in one's city or village, or to an international relief organization—all of these choices disclose how the navigation of the pious obligation for mutual care takes shape in complexly layered social worlds. There is no single, unitary, and prevailing model for making these choices. Looking at particular practices of zakat allows us to see how, in its distribution, Muslims reflect on this obligation of responsibility and care and make choices that interpellate them into a world of suffering and hope.

A further issue at stake in the distribution of zakat is the construction of gender. Broad socioeconomic data attest that the very category of "poor" is a gendered one: wherever there is poverty, the poorest of the poor are women (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 6). This is not to say that men are not also poor or do not suffer from material deprivation. It is, rather, to recognize that poverty and gender inequality intersect in such a way as to doubly disadvantage poor women.

If zakat functions to repair fissures and affirm social ties of obligation, what does the ideal of being obliged to care for others mean in terms of gender? For example, if a community leader collects zakat to build a medical clinic, does that clinic support prenatal and postnatal care? Does it recognize specific needs of women patients? If a local school is built with zakat funds, does it support the enrollment and retention of girls? If zakat is given to a poor family, do female children benefit as much or less than male children? If zakat funds support the day-to-day operations of an orphanage, how are the children in that

orphanage gendered? If zakat goes to poor families, are those family units identified by a mechanism that only accounts for male heads of households? What are the circumstances of cross-gender zakat donation? Much of the contemporary scholarship on zakat overlooks gender, yet these questions are relevant given that zakat becomes part of establishing an Islamic order in Muslim communities, and as historian Leila Ahmed (2001) reminds us, gender practices are often seen to authorize a social order as “Islamic” (p. 236). If both gender and social welfare practices characterize Islamic sociality, then exploring how they intersect—or not—allows us to better understand the multiple dimensions of piety, social belonging, and well-being in lived Islam.

Zakat involves a wide variety of commitments and has been integrated into diverse reform projects. Practices of zakat thus become one modality of the localization of Islam, and also its globalization. Given the imagination of zakat in Islamic social analysis and the theological significance of charitable giving, the practical dimension of zakat in various geographical and temporal contexts reveals how religion is embodied in everyday life. The following section describes the contemporary emergence in India of a local zakat practice that becomes linked to gender reform. In an effort to push beyond the redistribution of wealth in hopes of changing the structural determinants of poverty itself, Muslims have reworked the distribution of zakat into a project to counter gender discrimination.

### **Reorienting Zakat in Hyderabad: Gender, Ethics, and Dowry Resistance**

The Hyderabad Zakat and Charitable Trust was formed in the aftermath of severe communal riots between Muslims and Hindus following the 1992 destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. Across India, communal riots flared in many cities, including the historic area of the Old City in Hyderabad (Bachetta, 2000). For more than six months, riots erupted while police tried to contain the violence by enforcing a public curfew. The riots marked a crisis that was both local and national, as many people linked the harm and injury they witnessed to a larger scale of suffering and a pervasive climate of fear across the country. The violence of the riots in Hyderabad destabilized a sense of the city as shielded by its own traditions of cosmopolitanism. Metropolitan Hyderabad, with its population of almost eight million people, is a historically multi-religious city, yet many experienced the riots as a turning point in which local multiculturalism was subsumed into a dangerous politics of religious polarization. The subsequent

electoral success of Hindu nationalist groups that sought to “purify” India of its religious minorities further confirmed for many Muslims the sense of a changed and charged political climate. The Babri Masjid riots came to be seen by Muslims as a turning point after which their local security and national integration could no longer be taken for granted.

Within Hyderabad, there were many efforts to respond to the damage caused by the eruption of communal violence in the Old City. A small group of people from prominent Sunni families who wanted to help local victims of the riots pooled their zakat and formed the Hyderabad Zakat and Charitable Trust. The Zakat Trust collects charitable donations from local people, as well as from the broader community, including Hyderabadis who have migrated overseas. The Zakat Trust stands as an independent organization and is not affiliated with any mosque, madrassa, Islamic organization, or political party.

In the initial years after the riots, the Zakat Trust focused on Muslim slum areas of the Old City.<sup>4</sup> They opened healthcare clinics, started income-generating projects, and founded schools—the standard social service provision of religious charities involved in socioeconomic development. After more than a decade of running such projects, the donors of the Trust decided to shift the majority of their work into the field of higher education, offering scholarships to college and university students. One donor described the impetus behind this transition, stating “God is pushing us in this direction, pulling us.” Framing the decision of the Trust in theological terms reflects a sense of the donors that they are not just responding to the needs of the poor but that they are also responding to what they interpret as divine direction. This shift thus combined practical concerns with a sense of faithful action.

By shifting the focus from social service to higher education, the Zakat Trust hoped to go beyond distributing charity in order to challenge the structures of poverty. One of the founders of the Trust explained this shift to me:

*Everything we were doing, it was all first aid, just stopgap measures. We gave zakat, and still poor people were poor. We had to think about the long-term. Education is the key, if we want to change that. Not only in India, but everywhere, all over*

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that “slum” is not an aesthetic or cultural judgment; in India, “slum” is a legal and administrative category. The Census of India formally defines a slum based on population density, inadequate building construction, sanitation, and access to drinking water.

*the world, Muslims have been sleeping the past 800 years. Right now, we're just a liability on the nation. We've been in a shell. We've got to change that. We've got to bring the Muslims up, bring them up out of the shell.*

After a decade of directing their donations to social services, the Trust donors felt compelled to transform the structures that made poor people “still poor.” They identified education as a primary strategy that could provide an enduring change of the circumstances of poverty. Zakat-funded social services do not, in their estimation, ensure long-term change. The donor explicates this changed approach through a critique of Muslim modernity, and his language reflects the ways that zakat can link to questions of the nation-state. He contrasts the strategy of promoting education to a period of dormancy in which Muslims have succumbed to forces of insularity—“sleeping,” being “in a shell,” and ending up a “liability on the nation.” In her study of Shi'i Lebanon, Lara Deeb (2006) argues that modernity in the pious cultural sphere of the Islamic revival entails being “civilized” as opposed to being “backward” and achieving material and spiritual progress (p. 19). A similar understanding of piety, modernity, and progress is seen in the donor's contrast between Muslim cultural somnolence and Muslim cultural florescence. This donor's cultural critique involves a dual register, as he speaks about Muslims as both an object of intervention who must be acted upon (“bring them up”) as well as a group to which he belongs (the “we” who gave zakat, had to think, and has to change). His shifting voice expresses a complex sense of community, for he positions himself both inside the community as a Muslim and outside as an agent of change, one with resources to implement public projects. This duality reflects a doubled sense of responsibility for self and other, and a multiplex belonging in which one is both subsumed into a collective identity and can also, in turn, separate from and objectify it. Ultimately, this doubled belonging reflects the ways in which class identification stratifies any facile notion of Muslim community.

The Trust is anchored in the cosmopolitan history of Hyderabad, with its long-standing diversity and composite local culture. Prior to independence, Hyderabad's rulers were Twelver Shias, many of its residents were Sunni, and there were smaller communities of Ismailis and Bohras, all of which lived alongside multiple Hindu groups and other diverse ethnic and religious communities. Founders of the Trust sees themselves as connected to the city's particular tradition of cosmopolitan modernity and its history of elite care for the welfare of the vulnerable. Ubayd, one such founder, tied the Trust's work to the local religious

culture, explaining, “We don’t want to have a total madrasification of Islam here. I mean, this is our city.” Differentiating “our city” and “madrasification,” establishes a tension between cosmopolitanism on the one hand, and a particular kind of systematic, institutional development of Islam on the other hand. Across Asia, the development of Islamic educational institutions, *madrasas*, is often linked in popular understanding to wealthy Gulf Arab donors and their attempts to influence the local formation of Islamic life through patronage. Ubayd marks this global expansion of religious education, madrasification, as exogenous to the city. Liu (2012) theorizes that “thinking with the city” can be a way of making “claim[s] about what. . . collective existence ought to look like” (p. 9). For Ubayd, the claim that this is “our city” stakes his sense of responsibility for Islamic tradition in his local context, enabling him to position himself in relation to the changing religious culture not just spatially but also ethically. In his view, Islam can either exist in the space of the city, or it can be restricted through a totalizing process of institutionalization. He thus frames the city as an everyday lifeworld that bears vital possibilities for Islam.

The Trust forms zakat into a pedagogical attempt to inculcate a similar sense of personal responsibility for the local religious culture in recipients. Donors to the Trust, who are also its volunteers, see themselves as consistently responding to the Quranic obligation to help the poor, and at the same time, they want to support the possible transformation of poverty of the broader community of Muslims in India. They do not engage in explicit religious instruction, yet they do seek to promote the internalization and expression of Islamic ethics. The Trust’s formation of ethical subjects involves two overlapping processes that together mark out a common moral space in order to enact a project of countercultural gender reform. The Trust believes this ethical project of gender reform will improve the circumstances of Muslims in India while also enhancing the faithful practice of Islam.

The Trust holds scholarship camps for potential recipients, which begin by giving each student a written religious test and close by having students sign a formal and public oath. The first process establishes the religious foundation of the Trust’s zakat practice, and the second one orients it toward an ethical project of gender reform. All of the students who are seeking scholarship assistance are given an Islamic literacy test, which is administered and marked like a regular school exam: it is timed at one hour, incorrect answers are marked in red pen, and an overall score of less than 60% is seen as “not passing.” The test includes questions such as: How many cycles of prayer are to be performed at each of the daily prayer times? What is the meaning of the

call to prayer? What are the names of the rightly guided caliphs? And is it permissible to say “*assalaam ‘alaikum*” (the Arabic greeting of “peace be with you”) to non-Muslims? (The correct answer according to the Trust is, yes, it is a greeting to be used with everyone.) Donors correct the test themselves, and students are asked about the results during individual interviews.

In the final portion of the scholarship camp, after all of the students have been tested and individually interviewed, the Zakat Trust makes a comprehensive moral claim on the students by requiring them to take a public oath. Such gestures of commitment are found in various domains of Islamic tradition and have played an important role in Islamic history (Mottahedeh, 1980). The Zakat Trust’s oath shapes a trajectory of moral action and gender reform. In the first part of the oath, all students vow to give back the same amount of money that the Trust gave them, once they secure gainful employment. In the second part of the oath, students refuse to give or take a dowry.

Linking zakat to the refusal of dowry explicitly introduces a critique of gender into zakat. According to Sunni tradition, a bride is to receive a *mahr*, a capital gift that becomes her personal property in the course of marriage (Ali, 2010, p. 54). In India, and across South Asia, the popular practice of dowry works in the reverse: the young woman’s family pays a sum—in cash or in kind—to the groom’s family. The current economic situation has brought about increased pressure to raise larger dowries, which has resulted in a large number of young women across India’s Muslim communities who struggle to put together a sufficient dowry to marry. Dowry has been an issue of social reform in India since the early twentieth century. For example, Mahatma Gandhi and other counter-colonial reformers supported dowry abolition. In recent decades, sociologists have noted the entrenched practice of dowry across caste, class, and religious groups in India (Srinivas, 1978), despite the passage in 1961 of national legislation prohibiting dowry (India Ministry of Law, 1961). The Trust draws on a broader critique of dowry, yet locates the countercultural resistance to dowry within a specifically Islamic social ethic that integrates gender reform into collective well-being.

According to donors of the Zakat Trust, the practice of dowry cripples education and gender relations and therefore imperils material well-being and religious practice. The Trust maintains that both young women and men should be given an opportunity to make a constructive contribution to society. Donors of the Trust embrace a theory and theology of gender complementarianism that “emphasizes the equality of the sexes in Islam but stipulates this equality ever-more urgently on

the divinely decreed, immutable, and complete differences in their natures” (Stowasser, 1994, p. 37). This translates in practice to a determined support of the education and employment of young women, albeit in gendered professions such as nursing or teaching. Dowry becomes a crucial factor that jeopardizes the educational and professional attainment of young women, particularly those from lower-middle and working class families. In the structure of patriarchal joint families prevalent in Indian society, the practice of dowry often means that a family musters its limited financial resources to pay for a young woman’s dowry, most likely closing the door on any possibility of finding additional resources to fund her education.

In shifting their distribution to scholarships, the Zakat Trust is responding to a context of increasing poverty, educational deprivation, and inequality. Its focus on education mirrors public knowledge of the link between educational attainment and economic status. In 2006, the Indian government released the Sachar Committee Report, which documented that Muslims are India’s poorest demographic group. The Sachar Report notes that the “expansion of educational opportunities since Independence has not led to a convergence of attainment levels between Muslims and ‘All Others.’ Rather, the initial disparities between Muslims and ‘All Others’ have widened” (Prime Ministers High Level Committee, 2006, p. 81). Across India, Muslim students have lower levels of educational attainment, but Muslim girls especially so. In the state of Andhra Pradesh, most Muslim girls are first-generation learners. A 2005 study of Hyderabad showed that only 34% finish primary school; and less than 15% complete high school through grade ten (Hasan & Menon, 2005, p. 107). While all poorer students in India suffer from the limitations of national and state governments to guarantee universal primary education, girls can face additional sociocultural barriers to education, including the practice of restricting girls past puberty from attending school by justifying it as part of an Islamic practice of gender seclusion (*purdah*). By putting forth a critique of gender through the pledge to reform dowry and by giving scholarships, the Trust wants to eliminate any justification for the exclusion or repression of girls from education in the name of Islam.

The Trust makes the practice of zakat instrumental to the negotiation of gender relations, both in the intimate sphere of the family and in the public sphere of labor and production. Dowry reinforces gender discrimination in Muslim families and communities, which in turn reinforces low educational attainment and further entrenches poverty. As the Trust sees it, the ethical rejection of dowry reverses this cycle, affirming gender reform and economic success and, most

importantly, linking the two. An Islamic ethical critique of gender is thus tied to the promise and achievement of prosperity.

Among the different practices of zakat in India, the Trust is innovative in terms of using an oath in the distribution of charity. According to tradition, zakat is to be given unconditionally if it is to be considered legitimate, yet donors to the Trust feel they must alter the cultural worlds of poor Muslim youth in order to break interlocking cycles of poverty and gender discrimination. The donor who authored the oath, Hussain, shared with me the internal conflicts he has about asking the students to take it: "I know this could make our zakat impure, you know. I know that. But we have to do it. We have them there, we have this opportunity. The stakes are too high—we have to say something." As a religious practice, zakat has its sanctioned interpretations, but as far as Hussain is concerned, the Trust must be creative in the face of moral demands for change. Challenging practices like dowry, which are both cultural and material, means confronting what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (2000) calls "the extraordinary inertia which results in the inscription of social structures in bodies" (p. 172). When shaping a new practice of zakat produces an inner conflict of conscience, Hussain and other volunteers state that they must rely on God's forgiveness. Placing their zakat practice between the contingencies of the local situation and God's mercy frames a hermeneutic of necessity that supersedes practices of the past.<sup>5</sup> Zakat can also then constitute a space for reflecting on and creatively reconfiguring the affordances of Islamic law.

Through the oath against dowry and the pledge of future donation, the Trust inhabits a locus of persuasion that is explicitly pedagogical in its attempts to cultivate ethical Muslim subjects. Their donation of charity reshapes the distribution of zakat into a moment of reflexivity. All students are called upon to think about their future actions and imagine a trajectory in which their studies and employment connect to reformed gender roles, social welfare, the moral transformation of the family and society, and the condition of Muslims writ globally. The Trust attempts to activate an Islamic ethical disposition that anchors students in a sense that the world contains the possibility of change, that

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<sup>5</sup> Whereas Islamic jurisprudence recognizes public interest (*maslaha*) and necessity (*darurah*) as principles in forming Islamic law, several informants involved with the Trust did not conceptualize their experiment of zakat distribution through those legal terms. Rather they described their actions in terms of a conscious distancing from legal norms in light of the reality of their local situation.

deprivation and injustice are not inevitable. The Trust wants to give students what anthropologist Michael D. Jackson (2011) calls “existential power”—the “sense that one is able to act on the situation that is acting on you,” which is “contingent on one’s relationship with others” (pp. 184, 156). The Trust shapes this existential power contextually, in concentric circles that move outward from the individual, into the family, and then into society, implicitly recognizing how the ethical self, in the words of anthropologist Talal Asad (2015), “overlaps with, and contains other selves” (p. 175). The Trust thus makes the effort to counter the gendered structures of poverty into a way of opening up the imagination of gender and what it means to be Muslim, while also inscribing both donor and recipient in a common moral project of individual and collective well-being.

This zakat project emerged from layered desires to change poverty and gender discrimination, to improve the economic status of Muslims in India, and to embody and follow Islamic tradition. Positioning the Trust at the intersection of religion, economy, and society, donors make what they hope are normative claims upon recipients. Yet as much as donors want to shape the actions of recipients, they also affirm the importance of moral autonomy. They therefore release students to fulfill, or not, their pledged oath. As Bourdieu (2000) notes, “the symbolic transgression of a social frontier has a liberatory effect in its own right because it enacts the unthinkable” (p. 236). Although the Trust cannot compel students to forsake dowry, it does create an opening for students to legitimately do so. Like others who promote particular projects of social change, the donors of the Trust thus maintain a delicate position between the prescription of action and the integrity of release, between the pedagogical imperative to intervene and the ethical autonomy implicitly recognized in persuasion. By signaling both dimensions of this in-between position, donors of the Trust attempt to mark both their own action and that of their zakat recipients as authentically moral.

### **Refusing Precarity: Zakat as Practical Theodicy**

The public discourse of the Trust affirms the possibility of ethical action to transform poverty and gender, and reflects a confidence that educational attainment plays a crucial role in economic advancement. Behind this public confidence in transformative ethical action, the experiential dimension of this zakat practice is complex and somewhat ambiguous. In structured interviews, donors describe a clear sense of significant personal transformation because of their involvement with

the Trust, and they describe this way of giving zakat as deeply meaningful. These same interviews, however, also reveal a sense of doubt about the efficacy of the project, an uncertainty that subtends this experimental zakat practice. A pained awareness of limited efficacy exists alongside a sense of clear, experiential transformation. Donors' reflections on zakat thus emphasize the crystallization of existential power and also its elusiveness. Tracing the alternation between assertions of efficacy and expressions of subtending despair discloses how zakat can disrupt precarity and become a kind of practical theodicy.

Philosopher Kenneth Surin (2004) puts forth a definition of practical theodicy that is helpful in understanding this practice of zakat. Surin states that if we "evacuate theodicy from the realm of theory in order to relocate it in the realm of practice," we can "abandon a purely theoretical or 'aesthetic' approach to the 'problem of evil,' and instead [view] it as an essentially practical problem" (p. 67). This approach shifts away from theological explanations in order to explore how people "answer the practical questions: What does *God* do to overcome the evil and suffering that exist in his creation? What do *we* (qua creatures of God) do to overcome evil and suffering?" (Surin, 2004, p. 67). These answers are everyday attempts to "interrupt" what Surin calls "humankind's continuity-in-evil," and thus constitute a practical theodicy (p. 159). This analysis of the Trust shows that zakat functions as a practical theodicy—an attempt to interrupt the continuity of evil—by occasioning reflexivity and responsiveness.

As a practical theodicy, zakat interlaces a sense of connection to God with reflexivity and responsiveness. The formal discourse of the Trust draws on normative conceptions of Islamic tradition and can be associated with conceptions of piety (*taqwa*). Donors' personal reflections on zakat, however, move away from concerns with normativity to express other aspects of a connection to God and an awareness of transcendence. This connection comingles with expressions of reflexivity and responsiveness. As conceived by sociologist John Heritage (1984), reflexivity entails an "awareness of options" for acting in the world as well as the capacity to understand oneself as an actor (p. 119). We have already traced the Trust's attempt to crystallize reflexivity in recipients of zakat through the pedagogical practice of initiating an oath: they use the scholarship camps to construct a reflexive engagement with Islamic tradition and cultural norms of gender. Reflexivity also emerges as an element of donors' own narrations of their experience of zakat, as they describe seeing themselves as actors in "a world whose characteristics they are visibly and descriptably engaged in producing and reproducing" (Heritage, 1984,

p. 110). The Trust's practice of zakat encourages this "reflexive stance" toward the self and the shared world (Heritage, 1984, p. 119).

Narrating their experiences of zakat in individual interviews, donors emphasize the ways in which religion can be inflected in encountering the suffering of others. In their accounts, zakat occasions a change in how donors perceive themselves in relation to others—a change donors code in the language of transcendence. Ahmad, a building contractor who volunteers with the Trust, described in an interview an encounter he had during one scholarship camp:

*We were out visiting some students who needed money for their school fees. In the afternoon, I took a break. I went to the mosque to do my prayers. After prayers, I sat there for a while. When I came out, I met this young man. He was running a food stall that was there across from the mosque, all by himself. I watched him, thinking that he was alone there.*

*So we called him over and asked him about his situation. You know, he had got a scholarship from us the year before! I didn't recognize him because I wasn't at that scholarship camp the last year. He was the only support for his family, at 15 years, a college boy. He showed me how he kept his engineering notes by the cash box so he could study when there were no customers. When he explained this, some strange feeling was flowing in my heart, in my heart. It is so much! He is so young! This feeling was in my heart. You are humbled.*

*Sometimes that happens, you know, when you are at a scholarship camp. All of a sudden, you are breathless. The spirit transforms you and you see for a minute how you really are. It takes your breath away. It leaves you breathless, this feeling. I can't explain it. It's just there. It's the ultimate.*

Ahmad narrates this encounter through the language of revelation, of seeing "how you really are." He describes feeling humbled in perceiving the fortitude of this young student and claims that this kind of transformation is something "that just happens" in the course of the Trust's project. In his account, his own effort to see and know more about the young man's situation is followed by "the spirit" enabling true self-perception: "you see for a minute how you really are." Ahmad codes this transformation as different from everyday modes of consciousness, describing it as "some strange feeling," being "breathless." This is a

discourse of disruption, a disruption that is sharpened in its contrast by being linked to fundamental elements of human life—the heart and breath. In trying to convey his experience, Ahmad struggles, and finally denies any power to “explain” it. Instead, he describes a self-evident “feeling” that is “just there” and concludes with an all-encompassing reference to “the ultimate.” Ahmad’s narrative asserts his experience of transformation through zakat, describing how a changed consciousness of breath and heart that resists explanation left him, finally, humbled. The conclusion of his narrative thus emphasizes the limits of language in favor of an emphasis on experiencing the truth of oneself in the world with others.

Another building contractor who is one of the founders of the Trust and still volunteers at the scholarship camps, Hasan, also described changes of perception. Like Ahmad, Hasan affirms the potential of zakat to transform people. In his interview, he narrated the force of this change:

*If you go to the villages, it is really heart wrenching to see. Especially when you take people to do these interviews, you know, out in the villages, they are so shaken up by that. They see small children, small kids, stonecutters’ children, locksmiths’ kids. They are sitting on the side of the road, working for their parents, trying to make money. You see them, and it shakes you. It’s a sobering experience to go to these things.*

For Hasan, the physical distance he travels when volunteering exposes him to the materiality of poverty in a way that he may not see it as he moves about his life in the city. Like Ahmad, he describes seeing and feeling as different, which can leave people feeling “shaken,” “sobered,” and altered. In his account, reflexivity is occasioned by “thinking with the village,” to rework Liu’s phrase, drawing on the contrast of the village with the city as a way of sharpening perception of the struggle and deprivation of others.

When Hasan went on to describe the experience of giving zakat, he did not emphasize its obligatory nature or its function in purifying of wealth, but rather emphasized the connection between reflexivity and an ethic of responsiveness:

*It is really great. I feel really blessed that we are not the person on the other side. Doing this is very sobering and really, really satisfying, deep in your soul. You feel satisfied. But deep down, I know that it is nothing that I am doing, it is just his grace,*

*God's grace. It is very easy that I could've been born that side, one hundred percent. It is not boasting or trying to be humble. It is just God gives you opportunities. You use them.*

The language of “other side,” “that side,” evokes a sense of difference, one that Hasan attributes to chance. He could have been born “that side,” but he was not, and that implicates him in ethical obligation and a kind of divine action. This awareness of his position has a different emphasis than Ahmad’s reflection, which articulated an awareness of essence, of “things as they are.” Hasan, in contrast, describes his own position in segmented social space, echoing what Bourdieu (2000) called “the profound differentiation in the degree to which the social universe offers stable chances” to people (p. 225). For Hasan, the ethical obligation to use the opportunities given by God is deeply connected to the acknowledgment that chance plays a role in determining individual circumstance: being on that side is defined by lacking opportunities, which are also blessings, while being on this side obliges one to use them. In his account, an epistemological dimension, in which people consciously use opportunities/blessings to redress the inequality of chance, is conjoined to the power of grace that works through people to enable them to traverse differentiated social space, to perceive life on that side and perhaps make it better. As he sees it, these openings to redress suffering are “God-given” possibilities of responsiveness. Responsiveness thus makes reflexivity moral and provides an ethical trajectory for action beyond the moment of heightened perception of self and other.

Both Ahmad and Hasan describe giving zakat in terms of experiential transformation and draw on theological language to describe their changed self-understanding and the perception of others’ suffering. This language of transformation is noteworthy, given that donors encounter exactly what they expect within the overarching paradigm of intervention. Yet the donors’ language indicates expectation does not exhaust experience, as they have their “breath taken away,” and “feel so much.” In their narratives, these encounters have an almost aporetic quality. Perhaps the donors’ language of excess and disruption can be attributed to the falling away or passing through the dispositions that shape everyday maintenance of social boundaries. At a minimum, their narratives suggest a different sense of temporality in which the integration of consciousness, transcendence, and action seems to be intensified.

The Trust’s practice is an experimental one, shaping new moral subjectivities and communities through the distribution of zakat. Donors

endure rather than resolve the moral complications of their zakat practice, such as asking students to take an oath, in order to respond to poverty and gender discrimination. They are, in the words of ethicist Willis Jenkins (2013), “inventing new possibilities of cultural action from their inheritances,” in the hopes of making themselves and the recipients of zakat “competent to the problems they face” (p. 6). The challenges, both theological and practical, of their experimental project are absorbed by the deep moral rejection of precarity. Butler and Athanasiou (2013) posit that reflexivity enables responsiveness in confronting the social world. They note that “the predicament of being moved by what one sees, feels, and comes to know is always one in which one finds oneself transported elsewhere, into another scene, or into a social world in which one is not the center,” yet this “being moved” is not an end itself (p. xi). The objective is countering “regimes which allocate disposability and precarity” and the “processes and ideologies by which persons are disowned and abjected by normative and normalizing powers” (Butler & Athanasiou, p. 3). Donors of the Trust understand themselves as taking action to limit precarity and “assigned disposability” (Butler & Athanasiou, p. 20). By integrating a critique of gender norms through their scholarship program, they situate zakat as a vehicle for rejecting the status-quo regime that takes for granted Muslim poverty, limited educational attainment, and the oppression of girls.

In an interview, Hussain, the donor who authored the oath, explained at length the urgent stakes of rejecting precarity:

*Yes, people give dowry, they accept it. But what to do? We cannot accept it. Nobody will tell you this, but I am telling you this. Do you know how slavery is practiced in India because of dowry? Do you know how it functions? Like this: I have a daughter to be married. I go to the moneylender. I don't have anything to mortgage, so I mortgage my son. For how much? You know? About 6000 rupees.*

*So what happens is, I take 6000 rupees and come back. My son starts to go to this moneylender every single morning and starts to work for him. Right from sweeping his floor, to washing his clothes, everything. He works like a slave. His salary is fixed, say at 200 rupees per month. The 6000 rupees which is given as a loan—this 200 rupees which is the salary is deducted by the moneylender as the interest on that loan, payment for food or whatever.*

*So this guy is mortgaged for life. After one year, my second daughter is to be married, so I take my second son and mortgage him. After another year, my third daughter is to be married and I don't have any sons, so I go to a different moneylender and I mortgage myself. I work. I have nothing to eat because my salary goes towards paying off the loan. I'm not earning anything, the whole day I work. This goes on, this is a practice.*

*This is slavery. This happens here in India today. I will take you with me and show you. Not far from here, there is a village. I went to build a building near there last month. I can bring you to people who are in this slavery so you can talk to them. Do you want to write a paper on it? I can show you. This is another facet of the dowry system. These are unimaginable things that happen. This is a normal phenomenon. This is the social evil.*

In this analysis, Hussain sought to make explicit how the gendered cultural expectations of dowry connect to the enslavement of debt bondage.<sup>6</sup> When such extreme forms of exploitation shift from the “unimaginable” to become “normal,” that is “evil.” While the Trust explicitly addresses gender discrimination through dowry, its connection to other instruments of oppression remains unspoken. Hussain’s words affirm that rejecting one manifestation of precarity—dowry—helps break down a more pervasive and ensnaring web of disposability. In explicating this submerged danger of precarity, Hussain temporarily and imaginatively inhabits the position of the father in order to tease out the interlocking cycles of debt that can cumulatively ambush an entire family. “This is how I am connected to myself, to my religion, by putting myself in that situation,” he added. “We are all connected to the Creator by the person we are, by the thoughts we have in our minds. I think of what I can do and I have to try.” His words mark both the ethical mandate—the “have to”—and the imperfect, experimental nature of the effort—the “try.” The ethos of zakat, according to Hussain, is to mark the refusal to let evil be normal, and to reject the precarity that effectively ends human life by assigning disposability.

The structure of an interview allows donors to present refined narratives that are retrospective, complete, poignant, and even poetic. In

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<sup>6</sup> For an examination of debt bondage in India and other contemporary forms of enslavement, see Kevin Bales. (2005). *Understanding global slavery: A reader*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

some of these accounts, same-gender figures transform reflexivity. In Ahmed's narrative, it was the young food stall worker, and for Hussain, the imagined debt-slave father. Perhaps this is a way of managing or constraining intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), in which one axis of identity ramifies similarity (gender) as another is being traversed to apprehend difference (class). Yet in the course of volunteering for the Trust, I witnessed instances in which lived gender critique between people of different genders was less smooth, less even, and did not mirror the affect of Ahmed and Hussain's narratives. Once at a scholarship camp when I was volunteering to interview students, I saw a woman donor in what looked like an emotionally intense exchange with a male student recipient. On the long drive back to the city, Najmah, the donor, narrated what happened. "Oh that guy," she said. "I could just wring his neck! He's getting a scholarship for his second year of medical school. When I asked him how he paid his fees last year, he said 'Well, my brother got married.' He said they had to [ask for dowry from the bride's family] because when his sister got married, they borrowed a lot of money from a moneylender to pay her dowry. How does he expect things to stop?! Oh, I could just shake him! What is he thinking?!" For Najmah, the embodied negotiation to instigate new gender ethics and bring intersectionality to the fore was muddled and frustrating. The Trust's practice of zakat to reform gender and poverty accommodates a wide range of experience, both poetic transformations of consciousness and moments of disjointed, incomplete, and fraught negotiation. All of these narratives attest to the exploratory nature of the Trust's project: donors are building a model as they go for navigating the transformation of poverty in the intersection of tradition, culture, gender, self, other, nation, and God.

For donors of the Trust, their actions to instigate Islamic gender ethics as a way of confronting poverty are not just their own. Surin's questions about practical theodicy—What does *God* do to overcome the evil and suffering that exist in his creation? What do *we* (qua creatures of God) do to overcome evil and suffering?—indicate two separate modes of action, human and divine. Zakat donors who formed the Trust do understand themselves as actors in a shared human world, but also understand their actions to be connected to a divine, transcendent reality. Human action and divine action remain identifiably different in nature, yet donors do express the sense that they are connected. We see in their narratives a religious understanding of existential power.

## Conclusion

The practice of zakat is both obligatory and open, allowing it to reflect distinct contextual realities and to bear a particular ethos in different places and projects. In many parts of the globe, people connect zakat to the potential of education to ameliorate poverty (as the Trust does) and use it to support students and schools (Bowen, 2002; Malik, 2006). In the contemporary context of Malaysia, James C. Scott (1987) chronicled how villagers distinguish between two local practices of zakat: that paid to government religious officials (which many villagers sought to evade) and that given personally, in order to ensure their fulfillment of the Quranic obligation (p. 434). Scott relates that villagers who evaded paying the official zakat did so without voicing a critique of governmentality, thus their resistance remained “offstage.” For the Hyderabad Zakat and Charitable Trust, in contrast, the occasion to centralize critique is part of what makes zakat moral. There is, however, one important similarity between the village Scott studied and the Hyderabad Zakat and Charitable Trust case considered here: in both cases, people formed a uniquely local practice of zakat that is seen as a moral, authentic, and legitimate means of responding to the Quranic mandate to care for the vulnerable. In the case of the Hyderabad Zakat & Charitable Trust, donors extend this response into an attempt to refuse precarity and change those social practices that make some lives more vulnerable than others.

Locating the experiments of the Zakat Trust in the contemporary context of Muslim India begs the question of how to understand this project in terms of the politics of religion, piety, development, and neoliberalism in India. It would not be difficult to see the pedagogical efforts of the Trust in terms of what Mona Atia (2013) characterizes as “pious neoliberalism,” the interplay between religious and capitalist subjectivities which mutually transforms both. Atia describes pious neoliberalism as “[reconfiguring] religious practices in line with principles of economic rationality, productivity, and privatization” (p. xviii). The Zakat Trust’s support of higher education falls in line with the description of pious neoliberalism insofar as it encourages zakat recipients to be pious and productive professionals. The Trust frames its project in terms of community well-being, gendered precarity, and fostering the possibilities of an inclusive democratic culture in India. Donors are bound to the hope of sustaining Muslim community at a time when Muslims are being structurally marginalized by the state. This is a tricky position to stake out in terms of the political, religious, and economic landscape of contemporary India. Religiously,

the Zakat Trust stands apart from local Islamic organizations. Politically, its donors want to foster a sense of connection to the public good, even as they are keenly aware that Hindu nationalism seeks to constrain their place in the nation. Muslim educational attainment is so profoundly limited (attesting to the precarity Butler describes) that experimenting with zakat distribution to support Muslim higher education makes a significant material difference in the lives of students. Disrupting prevailing economic practices of gender oppression through dowry and extending education is a material and cultural project that bears traces of pious neoliberalism, but it also, at the same time, counters a logic of disposability that dispossesses Muslims of their sense of hope and belonging to each other and in the nation. For those who give and receive zakat through this project, it carries a postcolonial hope that the Muslim minority can thrive in a nation that recognizes the well-being of its many different citizens.

Notions of purification may characterize some zakat practices, but the sense of completion and epistemological clarity implied by the process of purification eludes donors who shape the Trust. For them, zakat becomes an opportunity to experiment with countering vulnerability, disposability, and precarity—realities that have no place in their imagination of an Islamic social order. Understood in Islamic tradition as an act of piety, zakat purifies wealth. When seen in light of the contemporary struggle to transform Muslim poverty in India, perhaps that pious purification can now also be seen in removing and rupturing behavioral despair.

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