



2011-08-01

Muslim Social Entrepreneurship: Religious Underpinnings and Modern Applications

Scott Jackson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studentpub>

 Part of the [Near and Middle Eastern Studies Commons](#)

The Library Student Research Grant program encourages outstanding student achievement in research, fosters information literacy, and stimulates original scholarship.

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Jackson, Scott, "Muslim Social Entrepreneurship: Religious Underpinnings and Modern Applications" (2011). *All Student Publications*. 80.

<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studentpub/80>

This Report is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Student Publications by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

**Muslim Social Entrepreneurship:
Religious Underpinnings and Modern Applications**

Scott J. Jackson

Harold B. Lee Library Research Grant Project

August 2011

**Muslim Social Entrepreneurship:
Religious Underpinnings and Modern Applications**

Scott J. Jackson

In 2010, the Wolfensohn Center for Development issued a report entitled “Social Entrepreneurship in the Middle East: Toward Sustainable Development for the Next Generation.” In this report, the authors presented a dilemma: “Although young people across the region face a diverse and complex set of challenges, the core of their struggle is defined by a lack of promising career trajectories and, more generally, by limited economic opportunity.”¹ With close to 25 percent of the Middle East’s young people ages 15 to 24 unemployed and prospects for a “youth bulge” over the next decade, this is a crisis of critical proportions and has implications for national stability, social cohesion, economic viability, and international security.

Yet, there has also been an impressive “youth bulge” of volunteerism in the Middle East. Citing the overwhelming interest in Takatof – the Emirates Foundation’s national volunteer center – following its opening, the Wolfensohn report argues that “this generation has a strong commitment to social responsibility.” In light of these two trends in the Middle East – crumbling opportunities for youth and a revival of civic participation – the authors offer a solution that harnesses the Middle East’s growing humanistic spirit to meet the needs of the economic future. This solution, they argue, is social entrepreneurship. “[S]ocial entrepreneurship can be a transformative tool,” they conclude, “one with the potential to usher in greater economic prosperity and social progress.”²

¹ Ehaab Abdou, Amina Fahmy, Diana Greenwald, and Jane Nelson, “Social Entrepreneurship in the Middle East: Toward Sustainable Development for the Next Generation,” Wolfensohn Center for Development at Brookings, the Dubai School of Government, and Silatech, 2010.

² Ibid.

Considering the nascent state of social entrepreneurship in the Middle East and the concept's Western origins, this is an intriguing claim. In proving this claim, the authors use data and evidence that begin to establish credibility, but still do not satisfactorily settle questions about the cultural appropriateness of such a solution. This paper seeks to fill in some of the gaps left by the Wolfensohn report through considering how social entrepreneurship may be viewed in context of what is perhaps the greatest driving force in the region, namely Islam. Through an analysis of the Quran and the *hadith*³, I find that Islam in fact lays deep bedrock for Muslim social entrepreneurship in the Middle East and that the Wolfensohn report's argument for social entrepreneurship as a catalyst for economic and social progress in the region does have valid cultural underpinnings.

What is Social Entrepreneurship?

As described in the Wolfensohn report as well as in the related literature, "social entrepreneurship" is a term that has grown in usage over the past 30 years and has come to describe organizations and individuals who solve social problems through entrepreneurship, innovation, and cross-sector collaboration. Much like traditional entrepreneurs, social entrepreneurs act as agents for converting ideas into scalable organizations, thus helping connect the knowledge of the Research and Development industry with the needs of society. Unlike their business counterparts, however, social entrepreneurs primarily seek a "social return" for their efforts instead of an "economic return."

³ The *hadith* are the corpus of stories about the life and example of the Prophet Muhammad. They serve as the prime resource for Muslims in determining how best to apply the teachings of the Quran into their daily lives. They are, in many cases, more expansive as well as more precise in their commandments than the Qur'an and extend to such subjects as economics and business, governance, family relations, and manners of prayer.

Although social entrepreneurs have long existed in society, the practice of classifying them as such has gained particular momentum only in recent decades. Coined in 1980, the term “social entrepreneurship” is now a concept that attracts research, news coverage, venture creation, and policy analysis. Harvard, Stanford, Oxford, Tulane, and many other universities have established social entrepreneurship programs while scholars from around the world have created research networks around the concept and even the World Bank and United Nations have incorporated related principles into their economic development agendas. In the wake of this growth in interest, a sizeable number of organizations have arisen to offer financing, lobbying, networking, and consulting to social entrepreneurs, thus representing a systemic shift in the nonprofit and business sectors and the cementing of an entirely new sector of activity.

Social Entrepreneurship from a Muslim Perspective

How might Muslims view social entrepreneurship within the context of Islam? Would they view it as Western encroachment? Would they be receptive to social entrepreneurs working in their communities; or even to becoming social entrepreneurs themselves? These questions are deep and miry and cannot be answered entirely within the course of this investigation. However, a look at the Quranic and hadithic foundations of Islam shine light on the place social entrepreneurship may or may not fill within Muslim societies and, particularly, in the Middle East.

Islam is a religion of everyday life. It extends beyond religious theology and into governance, business, health, and civic duty. *Sharia*, or the codified law of Islam determined by the Quran and the hadith, influences the doings of every member of Muslim society from the

salesman to the sultan, the shepherd to the sheikh. Thus, a view of social entrepreneurship's place in Muslim society must consider its place in the Quran and the hadith.

The decision to engage in social entrepreneurship is essentially one of charity, involving a sacrifice of time, energy, and often income for the betterment of another person or for society in general. Within Islam, charity is a topic of central focus. It is a matter of both social utility and religious devotion and is requisite of Muslims not only for earthly happiness, but also for eternal reward. The first *surah* (chapter) of the Qur'an following its introduction (the *fatihah*) teaches the importance of charity. The 43rd *ayah* (verse) adjures the believer to "be steadfast in prayer; practice regular Charity; and bow down your head with those who bow down (in worship)." This is the beginning of a regular theme throughout the revelations: though a believer has faith, they are not truly righteous unless they give charity.

To further emphasize the place of providing for the poor, the Qur'an also points to the influence of these good deeds in determining one's place in the life hereafter. The 107th *surah* issues the rhetorical, "Seest thou one who denies the Judgment (to come)?" This person, it continues, "is the (man) who repulses the orphan (with harshness), And encourages not the feeding of the indigent." In comparison, those who do participate in regular charity, "will have their reward with their Lord: on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve" (Q. 2:277). These verses prescribe charitable service not only out of earthly courtesy, but also as an imperative duty commanded by God and required of men for receipt of heavenly rewards.

Yet, social entrepreneurship also calls for social reform, building on the idea expressed by Martin Luther King, Jr.: "True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar . . . It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring."⁴ This aspect also finds

⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., "A Time to Break the Silence," speech quoted in "A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr." ed., James Melvin Washington, HarperCollins (1991), 241.

a place in Islam. The Quran (3:104) calls for there to “arise out of you a band of people inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong.” One well-known hadith adds the injunction, “Anyone of you who sees something lewd or dishonorable (*munkar*), let him change it with his hand. If he is unable, then with his tongue [. . .]”⁵ This teaching has inspired hundreds of reform movements within Islam since its birth, each calling for social and religious *jihad*, or striving in the path of God.⁶ Mahmoud Ayoub, writing on this joining of faith and action, explains, “This personal faith must, according to the Qur’an and Prophetic tradition [hadith], be manifested in individual and social goodness, moral conduct, and civic responsibility. It is an ongoing process of personal and social reform. The demand to translate inner faith into concrete social responsibility,” he continues “is clearly expressed in the Qur’anic injunction [3:104].”⁷

Through the lens of the Qur’an and the hadith, social entrepreneurship fits comfortably within the teachings of Islam. Its call for personal involvement in social reform motivated by charity is echoed in the foundational elements of the religion and viewed as complementary to the path taught by the Prophet Muhammad. While originating in more recent times in the West, social entrepreneurship may also be recognized as something distinctly Islamic in nature. In light of these facts, Islam can serve as a catalyst rather than a deterrent for social entrepreneurship in the Middle East and throughout the Muslim World.

⁵ Muslim, *Sahih, k. al-iman*, h. 70, quoted in Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *Islam: Faith and History*, Oxford: OneWorld Publications (2004), 198.

⁶ While many often associate this word with violence, *jihad* in the Qur’an and the hadith encompasses peaceful strivings for the cause of God as well. These may include personal struggles to overcome unrighteousness, social reform movements, striving to remove obstacles for religious freedom, and even smiling or entering an assembly. See M. Fethullah Gülen, *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*, New Jersey: The Light, Inc. (2004), 172.

⁷ Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *Islam: Faith and History*, Oxford: OneWorld Publications (2004), 52.

What Does This Mean for the Middle East?

If social entrepreneurship and Islam are as amenable in reality as they are in theory, the combination of these influences can be tools for great growth among Muslim societies. Representing nearly one-fifth of the human population and constituting a large proportion of the world's developing countries,⁸ the Muslim world grapples with a milieu of debilitating social problems. Many of these could potentially find solutions through the encouragement of social entrepreneurship among its people.

One specific example is that given in the above-mentioned report from the Wolfensohn group. As the youth population continues to grow disproportionately from – or in opposite directions as – economic growth in the Middle East, the region will face increased political instability, economic stagnation, and that deep-seeded societal malaise that follows not far behind high unemployment. The report estimates that more than 10 million youth face exclusion and disappointment in the job market, not counting the underemployed or those who have stopped searching. Through interviews with Middle Eastern social entrepreneurs, the authors conclude that social entrepreneurship is a viable means for combatting this downward spiral. They also argue that social entrepreneurship is a potential means for solving a slew of other social problems in the Middle East, including poor education, drug rehabilitation, and prospects for the hearing impaired.⁹

⁸ Pew Research Center: Forum on Religion & Public Life, “The Future of the Global Muslim Population: Projections for 2010- 2030,” Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project, (January 2011), http://pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/Muslim/FutureGlobalMuslimPopulation-WebPDF-Feb10.pdf (accessed March 14, 2011).

⁹ Ehaab Abdou, Amina Fahmy, Diana Greenwald, and Jane Nelson, “Social Entrepreneurship in the Middle East: Toward Sustainable Development for the Next Generation,” A report produced by the Wolfensohn Center for Development at Brookings, the Dubai School of Government, and Silatech, 2010, 14.

While it is uncertain exactly how social entrepreneurship is currently developing in the Middle East and throughout the Muslim world, its implications are intriguing. With foundations supported by the most central elements of Islam, social entrepreneurship has the potential to grow and make significant contributions in the ways Muslim societies tackle development challenges. As governments, civic societies, and religious groups collaborate to encourage a culture of positive social engagement, social entrepreneurship can serve as a tool to further development and prosperity throughout the Islamic world.

Works Cited

- Ehaab Abdou, Amina Fahmy, Diana Greenwald, and Jane Nelson, "Social Entrepreneurship in the Middle East: Toward Sustainable Development for the Next Generation," A report produced by the Wolfensohn Center for Development at Brookings, the Dubai School of Government, and Silatech, 2010.
- M. Fethullah Gülen, *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*, New Jersey: The Light, Inc. (2004), 172.
- Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *Islam: Faith and History*, Oxford: OneWorld Publications (2004), 52.
- Martin Luther King Jr., "A Time to Break the Silence," speech quoted in "A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr." ed., James Melvin Washington, HarperCollins (1991), 241.
- Muslim, *Sahih, k. al-iman*, h. 70, quoted in Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *Islam: Faith and History*, Oxford: OneWorld Publications (2004), 198.
- Pew Research Center: Forum on Religion & Public Life, "The Future of the Global Muslim Population: Projections for 2010- 2030," Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project, (January 2011),
http://pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/Muslim/FutureGlobalMuslimPopulation-WebPDF-Feb10.pdf (accessed March 14, 2011).
- Scott J. Jackson, "Social Entrepreneurship: Concepts and Implications for Problem Solving," Congressional Research Service Report for Congress (R41348), July 2010.