



Reviving the Waqf Tradition: Moral Imagination and the Structural Causes of Poverty

ZARA KHAN

YAQVEENTM
INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC RESEARCH

Author Biography

Dr. Zara Khan studied Political Science and social justice at the City University of New York, specializing in comparative political theory. Her main hope is to contribute to the Islamization of profane knowledge, particularly in education, politics, culture and economics insha'Allah. Areas of interest include Islamic teaching philosophy; materialist epistemology; secularization; critical race; capitalism, neoliberalism, and neocolonialism; human rights; ethical agriculture; cosmopolitan aesthetics; and the metaphysics of technology. She is an educator and researcher, currently leading Yaqeen's Task Force on Liberalism and Philosophy.

***Disclaimer:** The views, opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed in these papers and articles are strictly those of the authors. Furthermore, Yaqeen does not endorse any of the personal views of the authors on any platform. Our team is diverse on all fronts, allowing for constant, enriching dialogue that helps us produce high-quality research.*

Copyright © 2020. Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research

Abstract

This paper builds on recent research classifying Islamic charitable endowments—the institution of the *waqf*—into distinct stages of historical and institutional development. It aims to imagine how the *waqf* might look today. Throughout Islamic history, the *waqf* institution changed in form as the community’s material and historical circumstances changed while retaining the substance of its spiritual imperative. What are some of the root causes of poverty in today’s world, and how might the *waqf* be resuscitated to acknowledge and remedy those causes?

Introduction

This paper builds on the insights found in Khalil Abdurrashid’s *Financing Kindness as a Society: The Rise and Fall of Islamic Philanthropic Institutions (Waqfs)*¹ and asks how the Islamic civilizational heritage of *awqāf*, charitable endowments, might be revitalized today. The institution originated with the Prophet Muhammad, may God’s peace and blessings be upon him, and is rooted in Islam’s spiritual obligation to charitable giving. Parting with one’s wealth does not only fulfill a religious obligation (*zakāh*) but also resounds at the deeper level of the soul’s salvation by enabling the purification of the heart and the beautification of one’s character. Kind words, helping another across the road, removing litter from the street, showing affection towards one’s spouse, feeding the poor, and even remembering God are among the numerous actions that are considered charitable in Islam.

According to God’s promise, the interchange of material blessings increases the flow of spiritual blessings. The companions of the Prophet, may God’s peace and blessings be upon him, took this very seriously. After consultation and guidance

¹ See Khalil Abdurrashid, “Financing Kindness as a Society: The Rise and Fall of Islamic Philanthropic Institutions (Waqfs),” *Yaqeen*, January 9, 2020, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/khalil-abdurrashid/financing-kindness-as-a-society-the-rise-fall-of-islamic-philanthropic-institutions-waqfs/>.

from the Prophet, they established practices that later scholars would identify as *waqf* endowment, beginning with Abu Talha and his wife's donation of their date grove with over 600 palms in the service of Medina's poor. The spiritual worldview at the heart of charitable endowments in Islam (or their *ontological ground*) provokes one's desire to seek God's pleasure through service to His creatures and purify one's inner self of greed and other vices.

While *awqāf* have historically served educational, health, and other social needs, this paper focuses specifically on sites for alleviating structural causes of poverty. Two examples include the plight of global farmworkers in light of the global agricultural production line and the racialized wealth gap in the United States in its social and historical dimensions. I propose that certain institutional solutions to the poverty caused by these problems can be financed through *waqf* charitable endowments. In this way, Muslims can revive *awqāf* to address the specific needs of our day. Even where structural causes of poverty are caused by complex networks of global capital, local foundations can have transformative effects with far-reaching impacts.

Historical background

As recent scholarship has shown, the history of the *waqf* institution can be usefully understood in five stages.² These are the formation, post-formation, maturation, transformation, and deterioration periods. This genealogy reveals that the *waqf* institution became central to Islamic civilization and grew vastly diversified in the services it offered. It also reveals that the colonization of Muslim lands along with post-colonial nationalization projects came to obliterate the institution.

At its height, the *waqf* presented a “credible commitment device to give property owners economic security in return for social services” and was thus an integral tool for providing public goods through local trusts.³ A *waqf* is a charitable endowment that must fulfill the following requirements: 1) that the person

² Abdurrashid.

³ Timur Kuran, “The Provision of Public Goods under Islamic Law: Origins, Impact, and Limitations of the Waqf System,” *Law and Society Review* 35, no. 4 (2001): 841–98.

endowing it, or the subsequent maintainer, sequester the principal and devote the proceeds to charity; 2) that the endowment be specifically and legally removed from commodification (i.e., that it is no longer ‘on the market’); and 3) that its sole purpose be charitable, with the beneficiary group explicitly named. During the time of the Prophet Muhammad, may God’s peace and blessings be upon him, the first *waqf* consisted of a grove of 600 date palms, the proceeds of which fed Medina’s poor. During the Crusades, *awqāf* dealt with the ravages of war, such as feeding, housing, and nursing the poor, injured, and displaced.⁴ In sixteenth-century Jerusalem, the Haseki Sultan charitable complex founded by the wife of Suleyman the Magnificent serviced 26 villages and included shops, a covered bazaar, two soap plants, eleven flour mills, and two bathhouses (in Palestine and Lebanon). For hundreds of years, income generated by these businesses provided for the maintenance of a mosque, a sizable soup kitchen, and two traveler and pilgrim inns.⁵ In Aleppo during the eighteenth century, a *waqf* established by Hajj Musa Amiri included ten houses, sixty-seven shops, four traveler inns, two storerooms, several dyeing plants and baths, three bakeries, eight orchards, three gardens, and agricultural land.⁶

However, from the paragon of a morally accountable social ethos, in which property- and asset-owners felt spiritually and financially invested in uplifting the less fortunate, the *waqf* took a dismal turn during what Abdurrashid terms the institution's *deterioration period* (from the middle of the nineteenth century through World War I; notably immediately following the normalization of interest-based lending). Indeed this deterioration was due to the direct involvement of colonial powers. European colonizer states generally failed to comprehend the *waqf* system and through economic restructuring disrupted the practice of the endowments beyond recognition. For example, in Zanzibar, *awqāf* traditionally helped to foster bonds of interdependence between wealthy patron families and their less well-to-do clientele. The local elite families who endowed the public trusts maintained mosques (and were socially esteemed for doing so) and provided for clients and enslaved persons who had no means of their own. By contrast,

⁴ Abdurrashid.

⁵ Kuran, “Provision of Public Goods,” 849.

⁶ Kuran, 850.

British economic norms pertaining to social welfare and order meant different patterns of rights, responsibilities, and the distribution of political power and economic resources. The British colonial administration insisted that wealth instead function as a private business resource (as opposed to a publicly endowed charitable fund), while mosque upkeep was to become governmentalized. The former *waqf* clientele became a “working class entirely dependent on wage labor.”⁷

In their mission to codify and fix interpretations, colonial administrators often undermined traditional female trusteeship in favor of exclusively male trusteeship (the *mutawallī* of the *waqf*). While colonial outposts farther removed from the metropolises, such as Tanganyika (which later became Tanzania), saw relative longevity for *awqāf* and female trusteeship, centers of colonial rule experienced an interrupted and uprooted history of the traditional institution.⁸

The other cause of deterioration was the *waqf* becoming nationalized and, over time, bankrupted and without any operational funding. Postcolonial Muslim governments were unable to meet social service needs at levels previously handled through *awqāf*, leading to increasing impoverishment and general neglect. For example, at the end of the eighteenth century, the estimated “combined income of the roughly 20,000 Ottoman *waqfs* in operation equaled one-third of the Ottoman state's total revenue, including the yield from tax farms in the Balkans, Turkey, and the Arab world.”⁹ Both in geographic terms when accounting for the Ottoman territory, and fiscally in terms of the total percentage of revenue, such income represents a gargantuan quantity. When we look at the figures in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for Turkey, Egypt, Iran, Algeria, Tunisia, and Greece, we see that *significant percentages* of all arable land, cultivated soil, or total land area were *awqāf* (see Table 1).

⁷ Norbert Oberauer, “‘Fantastic Charities’: The Transformation of ‘Waqf’ Practice in Colonial Zanzibar,” *Islamic Law and Society* 15, no. 3 (2008): 315–70.

⁸ Chau Johnsen Kelly, “Asha binti Awadh’s ‘Awqaf’: Muslim Endurance Despite Colonial Law in Mikindani, Tanganyika,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 47, no. 1 (2014): 1–20.

⁹ Kuran, “Provision of Public Goods,” 849.

Country	Year	% <i>Waqf</i>
Turkey	1923	75% all arable land
Egypt	1920s	12.5% all cultivated soil
Iran	1920s	14.29% all cultivated soil
Algeria	1850s	50% agricultural land
Tunisia	1883	33% agricultural land
Greece	1829 (after breaking from Ottoman Empire)	30% total land area (confiscated by new government)

*Table 1: Waqf-controlled land in the Twentieth Century*¹⁰

Muslim charitable giving today¹¹

In the twenty-first century, we find that globally, there is no single paradigm of *Islamic economics* that Muslim-majority states employ. Islamic principles pertaining to wealth, property, labor, etc. are contextualized and appropriated in a variety of ways given the specific material conditions and cultural histories of the various locales.¹² Political scrutiny, institutional frameworks, and policy choices all shape Islamic financial legal application today without necessarily upsetting the sacred textual decrees. As such, the channeling and administration of the Muslim requirement of charity, *zakāh*, is administered in numerous different ways.¹³ Based on the major factors of resource endowments, demography, economic history, and politics, Muslim-majority countries arrive at unique national infrastructure for distribution of the wealth tax. As for philanthropic giving in Muslim communities, the magnitude is unclear, but a 2004 report by the Center for Strategic and

¹⁰ Compiled from various sources in Kuran.

¹¹ I'm grateful to Altaf Husain of Howard University and Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research for his contribution to my understanding of Muslim charitable giving today.

¹² Rodney Wilson, *Islam and Economic Policy: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

¹³ Wilson.

International Studies estimates it to fall between \$250 billion and \$1 trillion annually.¹⁴

In the North American context, this charitable giving mostly takes the form of relief efforts and remittances sent “back home.” After September 11th, 2001, our giving has seen a shift to domestic causes, guided by the scrutinizing of our assets during the so-called *war on terror*.¹⁵ We have also seen the opening up of new non-profit spaces such as the Pillars Fund and the American Muslim Fund. The 2019 report jointly issued by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding and the Lake Institute on Faith and Giving entitled “American Muslim Philanthropy: A Data-Driven Comparative Profile” sheds light on the specific trends of our charitable giving today.¹⁶ Nearly 89% of respondents reported that they contributed to their house of worship. Another important cause is overseas relief (54%). One issue that Muslims invest in more than our counterparts from other faiths is civil rights protection for community members (48%). Additionally, “for Muslims, among the issues facing those outside their faith community, domestic poverty is the most important charitable cause (81%), followed by overseas relief (58%) and educational causes (54%).”¹⁷

What has not yet emerged are efforts to centralize the giving at a national level along the lines of the United Way, the Salvation Army, Catholic Charities, or the Jewish Federation, for example. Arguably, our classically trained scholars of Islamic sciences, in collaboration with our political economists, sociologists, and historians of the American context, ought to determine if such centralization is a desirable goal, and if so, how and why.

We know that our Muslim civilizational history provides a robust charitable endowment institution in the *awqāf*. We also know that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, colonial and postcolonial national forces motivated by political and economic interests systematically and structurally dismantled the *waqf* to the

¹⁴ Jon B. Alterman and Shireen Hunter, “The Idea of Philanthropy in Muslim Contexts,” (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2004), <http://www.mafhoum.com/press7/188C31.pdf>.

¹⁵ Barnett F. Baron, “The Treasury Guidelines Have Had Little Impact Overall on U.S. International Philanthropy, But They Have Had a Chilling Impact on US-based Muslim Charities,” *Pace Law Review* 25, no. 2 (2005): 307–20.

¹⁶ Faiqa Mahmood, *American Muslim Philanthropy: A Data-Driven Comparative Profile*, The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, July 2019.

¹⁷ Mahmood, 8.

point that it is no longer part of the living history of Muslim civilization but is a deracination. Looking ahead to a possible future I ask: how can the *waqf* be revitalized today in a way that is relevant to our society's structural poverty and authentic to the ethical impetus of Islamic giving? I provide two concrete examples of pressing need and propose these as sites for establishing modern-day *awqāf*.

Two cases of pressing structural poverty in today's world

It is imperative to understand poverty in relational terms, or multi-dimensionally, as a set of experiences.¹⁸ Poverty is best understood through the patterns of human relationships that undergird it and the social institutions that organize these relationships.¹⁹ This is where the *waqf* institution can be instrumental insofar as it defines a specific socially organized set of relations. Globally, at the beginning of the twenty-first century more than one-third of the human population (three billion out of a total 7.8 billion people) live in poverty, on less than \$2 USD/day. Two billion around the world suffer a mineral deficiency, one billion have no access to potable water, and 840 million are undernourished and hungry. Poverty and food insecurity seasonally lead to incidents like drought, war, inclement weather, and famine. Ironically enough, *three-fourths* of the world's undernourished people live in rural areas and are the producers and sellers of the food we all eat.²⁰

In our own nation, poverty refracts along racial lines. White households average wealth in the amount of \$656,000, Latino households average \$98,000, and Black households average just \$85,000. Average Black and Latino households don't even *combine* to equal *half* of average White wealth. Compounding this stark reality, it would "take the average black family 228 years to accrue the same amount of

¹⁸ Paul Spicker, *The Poverty of Nations: A Relational Perspective* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2020).

¹⁹ Frances Fox Piven, *Relational Poverty Politics*, ed. Victoria Lawson and Sarah Elwood (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018), ix.

²⁰ Marcel Mazoyer and Laurence Roudart, *A History of World Agriculture: From the Neolithic Age to the Current Crisis*, trans. James Membrez (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2006).

wealth that white families have today.”²¹ Median wealth provides a more representative picture of typical households than average wealth since it prevents the highest incomes at the top (small in number that they are) from skewing the midpoint. But whether you look at median or mean wealth, White households are significantly wealthier than Black and Latino households. *Average* White wealth is three-four times greater than Black, Latino, and other minority wealth, while *median* White wealth is five-seven times greater than median minority wealth.²²

But what are the root causes of poverty today, as in the two examples provided? This question can be approached in at least three ways: 1) spiritual impoverishment; 2) structural exploitation; and 3) cultural norms (e.g., consumerism or wastefulness). Focusing on the relation between spiritual impoverishment and structural exploitation, I propose two pathways through which Muslims can revitalize the *waqf* and address the structural causes of poverty identified above.

Revitalizing the *waqf* and alleviating the plight of farmworkers

Permaculture design can provide an answer to address the global plight of farmworkers. Permaculture design, theorized by Bill Mollison, is the conscious design and maintenance of agriculturally productive ecosystems that have the diversity, stability, and resilience of natural ecosystems. It involves the harmonious integration of landscape and people providing their food, energy, shelter, and other material and non-material needs in a sustainable way.²³ There are several successful ecosystem restoration camps worldwide where permaculture design principles have been instituted to produce improved agricultural and biodiversity outcomes. For example, Camp Contour Lines in the Tatin Village of the Guatemalan rainforest has pushed back against the ravages of slash-and-burn

²¹ Dedrick Asante-Muhammad and Chuck Collins, “America’s Racial Wealth Divide Is Nothing Short of Shocking,” Other Words, August 10, 2016, <https://otherwords.org/americas-racial-wealth-divide-is-nothing-short-of-shocking/>.

²² Brendan O’Flaherty, *The Economics of Race in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015): 399–402.

²³ Bill Mollison, *Permaculture: A Designer’s Manual* (Tyalgum, NSW: Tagari Publications, 1988).

deforestation and corn monoculture to produce diverse, locally-owned agroforestry. Similarly, Camp Via Organica in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, is leading the regional effort to educate and form interventionist and regenerative ways of producing food to challenge the desertification Mexico is experiencing. Camp Paradise in Butte County, California was set up as a direct result of the 2018 wildfires that destroyed over 110,000 acres of forest. It is successfully mobilizing local community residents and schools to join the restoration project. Camp Uthai in Thailand, Camp Habiba in Sinai, Egypt and Camp Virsoleil in Ajat, France are other successful examples of the implementation of permaculture design principles into restorative projects that are good for the earth and good for local economic sustainability.²⁴

One of the assumptions behind permaculture design is that local ecosystems are capable of providing for the needs of the living things comprising them and relying upon them. But that is far from how the current global agricultural system operates. The process that brings food from farm to table proceeds as follows: wilderness is biologically cleansed; most arable land is converted to subsistence agriculture farms that specialize in only specific species of a small number of crops or animals; these species are selected based on their resistance to diseases and toxic pesticides; postcolonial states in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa were assigned their crops based on the Europeans' vision of a single global supply chain (what are called *cash crop economies*, or the various *banana republics* in Latin America). Countries that survive through cash crop economies are extremely vulnerable to devastation and even starvation, as they are susceptible to fluctuations in global supply and demand as well as bad harvest seasons. The species that are exclusively selected—i.e., of preferred or favored varieties of livestock—become extremely immune-deficient over time as there is no more of the cross-breeding found in nature to keep genetic pools robust. They are also vulnerable to plague, which would wipe out the supply of millions, and for this reason, farmers over-medicate their domesticated animals—all of which enters our own bodies and even those of our babies through breastmilk.

²⁴ See <https://ecosystemrestorationcamps.org/>.

In addition to the physiological and ecological costs, the global food production system carries subsistence and livelihood costs. Internationally, farmworkers get paid pennies per hour of labor producing the world's food supply. For example, certain groups of Mexican farmers, while earning twice or three times more than the minimum wage, make \$9/day.²⁵ American farms don't fare significantly better than their international counterparts and are disappearing at an ever-increasing rate. The current global agribusiness arrangement is *directly* forcing vast majorities of the world's agricultural population into extreme poverty and hunger, often to the brink of death.²⁶ According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the suicide rate is higher among farmers as a group than any other occupation.²⁷

In addition to rising suicide rates among American dairy farmers, farmer suicides have significantly increased across the globe. Research findings released by France's public health institute in 2016 indicate that "985 farmers killed themselves from 2007 to 2011—a suicide rate 22 percent higher than that of the general population."²⁸ In India, where 49% of the population works in agricultural food production, over 290,000 farmers have committed suicide between 1995 and 2014.²⁹ Even the globalization model case and international breadbasket Australia suffers this phenomenon. Studies find that, in Queensland, "farmers are more than twice as likely as the general population to take their own lives. In remote parts of the state, the suicide rate for farmers was up to five times that of nonfarmers."³⁰ The racist politics of agribusiness also lead to food deserts in urban centers, in

²⁵ See Agustín Escobar Latapi, Philip Martin, and Omar Stabridis, "Farm Labor and Mexico's Export Produce Industry," Wilson Center, 2019,

<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/farm-labor-and-mexicos-export-produce-industry>.

²⁶ Mazoyer and Roudart, *History of World Agriculture*, 10–15.

²⁷ Tovia Smith, "As Milk Prices Decline, Worries About Dairy Farmer Suicides Rise," All Things Considered, National Public Radio, February 27, 2018,

<https://www.npr.org/2018/02/27/586586267/as-milk-prices-decline-worries-about-dairy-farmer-suicides-rise>.

²⁸ Paméla Rougerie, "Quiet Epidemic of Suicide Claims France's Farmers," *New York Times*, August 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/20/world/europe/france-farm-suicide.html>.

²⁹ Ellen Barry, "After Farmers Commit Suicide, Debts Fall on Families in India," *New York Times*, February 22, 2014,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/23/world/asia/after-farmers-commit-suicide-debts-fall-on-families-in-india.html>.

³⁰ Jacqueline Williams, "A Booming Economy with a Tragic Price," *New York Times*, May 20, 2018,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/20/world/australia/rural-suicides-farmers-globalization.html>.

which fresh, healthy produce is simply unavailable to working-class city-dwellers.

31

This dismal trajectory follows the broader logic of capitalist accumulation and monopolization that governs international trade. Transportation costs are lowered (thanks to war against oil-rich countries followed by what David Harvey calls *accumulation by dispossession*³²) and agricultural trade is *liberalized*, meaning forcibly opened up into more global ‘free markets.’ In reality, supposedly ‘free trade’ involves one set of exchangers enjoying the full protection of the State’s military power and market regulatory mechanisms and the other set of exchangers having no security or say in the terms of trade whatsoever. For example, upon dissolution of the political colonial administrations, colonized countries were lent money (with conditions) by the same powers who had been colonizing them. Referring to the fiscal revenue enjoyed by colonial powers in their *honorable exit* toward *welfare colonialism*, Crawford Young states: “The essence of terminal colonial politics was the implanting of fragile graftings of a constitutional polity onto the robust trunk of colonial autocracy.”³³ This is why much literature on colonialism prefers the term *neocolonialism* over *postcolonialism*, the former implying a mere change in the form of exploitation and plunder while the latter implies its end. Much like the infamous Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) required by International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans, loans from former colonial powers create situations of unpayable debt: punitive and vindictive financial situations that some call *revenge capitalism*.³⁴ The ‘free market’ does not involve contracts among equals but slave contracts.³⁵

While some think of new and improved technology and the globalization of the world as necessarily good things, on the ground these devices benefit the wealthy

³¹ See Illene Pevec, *Growing a Life: Teen Gardeners Harvest Food, Health, and Joy* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 225–37; Amanda Whelan, Neil Wrigley, Daniel Warm, and Elizabeth Cannings, “Life in a ‘Food Desert,’” *Urban Studies* 39, no. 11 (October 2002): 2083–2100.

³² David Harvey, “The ‘New’ Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession,” *Socialist Register*, 2004, 63–87.

³³ Crawford Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 217.

³⁴ Max Haiven, *Revenge Capitalism: The Ghosts of Empire, the Demons of Capital, and the Settling of Unpayable Debts* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 48–51.

³⁵ See for example, Andrew Ross, “Mr. Reggae DJ, Meet the International Monetary Fund” in *Real Love: In Pursuit of Cultural Justice* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 35–69; *Life and Debt*, directed by Stephanie Black, written by Jamaica Kincaid, 2001.

at the expense of the poor. Motorization and mechanization of farm equipment are too costly and can never be universally accomplished; they also produce widespread unemployment, destroying people's ability to sustain themselves and their families, communities, and nations.³⁶ The underequipped peasantry has to “compete” with overseas commodities—like bananas, lettuce, carrots, meat, or milk—that come from that 10% of fully mechanized, successful factory farms that can afford to offer their produce at very low prices. The farmworkers fall, one by one.

Recall that during the maturation period of the *waqf* in Islamic history, as the community's needs changed so did the services offered by the *awqāf*. Today our needs are deeply entangled in the global economic system. This capitalist system is a life-sucking force for global farmworkers in the manner in which Thom Hartmann uses the Algonquian word *wetiko*. *Wetiko* means a sickness of complete lack of concern for others and Hartmann uses it to describe our modern warmongering and consumerist way of life.³⁷ Given this reality, the question becomes: How can Islam inspire Muslims to challenge and block the ravages of global capitalism? Specifically, how can we revive *awqāf* to redress the deadly ravages inflicted upon global farmworkers?

Investing in permaculture design would produce several concrete solutions to the crisis of global agriculture. The permaculture *statement of ethics* includes the following provisions:

- No further disturbance of natural forests
- Vigorous rehabilitation of wasted systems
- Minimal land use for cultivation of plant systems
- Creation of refuge sanctuaries for endangered species of plants and animals
- Creation of our own non-invasive systems based on these ethical principles

Designing local agricultural systems based on these principles would: localize food production and farm labor; wrestle control over the food supply away from big business and invest communities with greater accountability for how we live and

³⁶ Mazoyer and Roudart, *History of World Agriculture*, 15.

³⁷ Thom Hartmann, “Columbus Day Celebration? Think Again!,” Common Dreams, October 10, 2004, <https://www.commondreams.org/views04/1011-27.htm>.

what we eat; rewild tracts of agricultural land (meaning the return of land back to the wilderness) to increase biodiversity, healthy ecosystem function and soil resilience; and interrupt the global supply chain that thrives on the pauperization of most of the world's farmworkers. The success of ecosystem restoration camps (mentioned above) and smaller-scale community garden and local food co-op projects provide evidence as well as hope for thinking outside the global supply chain box. They also provide concrete sites for tethering local *waqf* infrastructure that spiritually washes our wealth while addressing a real historical problem. As Mollison and others acknowledge, it is not the lack of creative alternatives to the current agricultural production system that is the problem: it is the lack of political will to put those alternatives into action.³⁸

Revitalizing the *waqf* and diminishing the racial wealth chasm

The other example of structural poverty in our world, which I propose can be a space for revitalizing *awqāf* today, is the racial wealth divide in the United States. Over the past three decades, racial wealth discrepancies have only grown. After adjusting for inflation, we find that, between 1983 and 2016, median wealth of White families has increased from \$110,000 to \$147,000; median wealth of Black families has decreased by half from \$7,000 to \$3,500; and median wealth of Latino families has increased slightly from \$4,000 to \$6,500.³⁹ The wealth gap also creates and exacerbates other gaps: the achievement gap—the difference between the educational attainment levels of two groups, including standardized test

³⁸ Mollison states: “The real difference between a cultivated (designed) ecosystem, and a natural system is that the great majority of species (and biomass) in the *cultivated* ecology is intended for the use of humans or their livestock. We are only a small part of the total primeval or natural species assembly, and only a small part of its yields are directly available to us. . . . This is a valid aim for *settlement design*, but we also need a nature-centered ethic for wilderness conservation. We cannot, however, do much for nature if we do not govern our greed, and if we do not supply our needs from our existing settlements. If we can achieve this aim, we can withdraw from much of the agricultural landscape, and allow natural systems to flourish.” Mollison, *Permaculture*, 7.

³⁹ Chuck Collins, Darrick Hamilton, Dedrick Asante-Muhammad, and Josh Hoxie, “Ten Solutions to Bridge the Racial Wealth Divide,” Institute for Policy Studies, April 2019, <https://ips-dc.org/report-racial-wealth-divide-solutions/>.

performance across the groups—the gap in economic mobility, the standard of living gap, and racial health disparities.

The anti-racism organization Muslim ARC is a beautiful example of Muslims working in research, curriculum, and community partnerships to combat institutionalized racism. Islah LA is another organization working to provide quality social services that restore and renew faith, education, unity, family, civic engagement, and economic empowerment in Southern Los Angeles, California. The vehicle of the *waqf* can specifically target the racial wealth gap by financing community centers, artist collectives, think tanks, media outlets, and advocacy institutions that work specifically toward bridging the racial wealth gap. In addition, Muslims can find concrete recommendations for creating target-specific *waqf* endowments in the National Community Reinvestment Coalition, Ohio State University, Institute for Policy Studies, and Inequality.org, who in 2019 issued a joint report titled “Ten Solutions to Bridge the Racial Wealth Divide.” The report makes policy recommendations at the federal level but several of these can be blueprints for private *waqf* programs. For example, we can create baby bonds which are managed accounts set up at birth for children endowed at a level based on the financial position of that child’s family. Each year thereafter, money is added to the account, again, inversely proportional to the child’s poverty level. When the child reaches adulthood, the bond can be used toward education, purchasing a home, or opening up a business. The hope is to begin to redress the ravages of unfair race-based inherited advantage that systematically under-develops opportunities for the majority of Black and Latino families. Recent research at Columbia University’s Center on Poverty and Social Policy has shown that, properly instated, baby bonds could reduce the racial wealth divide by more than tenfold.⁴⁰

Guaranteed employment is another potential *waqf* site. Research shows that simply increasing workforce participation is not sufficient for allowing families to lift themselves out of poverty. Most working-class families—what the Bureau of Labor Statistics calls the ‘working poor’—work several jobs simultaneously all their lives and still pass zero wealth on to their children. More *good* jobs that pay

⁴⁰ Collins, Hamilton, Asante-Muhammad, and Hoxie.

living wages are needed for all those able to work. Guaranteed employment would take a certain form at the federal level, but in the private sector at the *awqāf* level, Muslims can create job banks in their locales—a register of necessary tasks—and employ low-income Black and Latino adult workers at minimum wage, which is an annual \$24,600 for full-time work and includes a standard benefits package. After adjusting for inflation, the minimum wage has not only failed to keep up, it has actually *gone down* since 1968.⁴¹ For many Americans, it is nearly impossible to survive on today's minimum wage. Building toward guaranteed employment would begin to redress this.

Another potential *waqf* site is investment in affordable housing. One can scarcely find locales in the United States today where a worker earning the federal minimum wage (\$7.25/hr) can afford to rent a two-bedroom apartment. For this reason, several states set minimum wage rates higher than the federal minimum in order to better approximate living wage requirements. Muslims can endow trusts, like the Housing Trust Fund proposed by Senator Elizabeth Warren. The trust would provide homes for low-income families and down-payment assistance to first-time homebuyers. The trust can specifically assist families at risk of losing their homes due to gentrification. It would also be a site to advocate for shifting the present tax incentives that privilege wealthy homeowners over renters and first-time buyers.

Another potential *waqf* site for redressing the racial wealth divide is free medical clinics. The American Muslim community is blessed with an abundance of medical doctors. If wealth- and property-owning Muslims collectively endow the establishment and staffing of clinics in neighboring low-income areas, and if each Muslim doctor gives one day weekly or monthly to provide medical check-ups and treatment free of charge, it would immensely impact the overall health, well-being, and economic stability of Muslims and non-Muslims across low-income communities. Scores of Americans go into poverty each year due to medical bills; *awqāf* establishing free medical clinics could alleviate this phenomenon. Other potential and easy-to-implement *waqf* programs include interest-free lending and

⁴¹ Collins, Hamilton, Asante-Muhammad, and Hoxie.

fee-less check cashing, which would help to rectify the unequal and unfair race-based distribution of inherited advantage in the United States.

Conclusion

The Prophet Muhammad, may God's peace and blessings be upon him, said: "The hand above is better than the hand below," meaning the hand that gives is better than the hand that receives. In elaborating on this hadith, Ubaydullah Evans suggests that African American Muslim communities and their allies ought to have collaborative sessions to map out mechanisms by which certain African American Muslim communities can become hands that give, thereby partaking in the blessing promised in the hadith.⁴² In addition to revitalizing the *waqf* as the central mechanism in Muslim society uniting the spiritual ground of giving with the concrete imperatives of social welfarism, such measures would also renew a lost *sunnah*. Economic partnerships across American Muslim communities through *waqf* funds could potentially resuscitate that beautiful and necessary *anṣār-muhājirūn* kinship set up by the Prophet Muhammad, may God's peace and blessings be upon him, when he saw his community in Medina divided in their stability and resource base. In our ethnically and racially diverse Muslim community here in the United States, we are notably missing these types of relationships. What would happen to the racial wealth divide in America if each migrant family was tied to an indigenous family among African American, Latino American, and Native American communities, with an added layer of mutual rights and concern? *Awqāf* are not limited to exclusively benefitting Muslims, so it stands to reason that such potential *waqf* sites for redressing the racial wealth divide would help dignify and advance non-Muslim people of color in the United States as well.

There are countless points of intervention where Muslims can identify structural causes of poverty and develop *waqf* institutes to redress them. For example, animal sanctuaries have been secured through *waqf* endowments in Muslim history. How can *awqāf* be revitalized today to address the ecological devastation that includes

⁴² Ubaydullah Evans, "The Hand That Gives Is Better than One That Receives: Blackamerican Islam, the Promise of Upward Mobility, and *Zakat al-Mal*," Symposium on Muslim Philanthropy and Civil Society, Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, Indiana University, November 4–5, 2019.

depletion of freshwater sources and species extinction? The possibilities are endless if we employ what John Paul Lederach calls *the moral imagination*, “the one thing uniquely gifted to our species, but which we have only on rare occasions understood or mobilized” that alone can orient us toward a more human horizon “to constructively impact the fundamental well-being of the human community.”⁴³ We ought to hasten to clear the obstructions of time and abandonment from the rich civilizational well of the *waqf*, and through it employ our moral imagination for solving the specific structural causes of poverty in our world. That is, after all, the legacy of the Muslim *waqf* institution.

And Allah knows best.

⁴³ John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 23. I am especially thankful to Scott C. Alexander of the Catholic Theological Union, who, in reflecting on a previous draft of this paper presented at the Symposium on Muslim Philanthropy and Civil Society, commented that the present suggestions for revitalizing the *waqf* are a work of what Lederach calls *the moral imagination*.