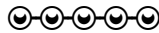


CHAPTER 15

The Gift of Food

An Islamic Ethics of Care

Amira Mittermaier



Giving a man a fish has a bad reputation. A common view holds that we're better off teaching men how to fish.¹ Despite and against this developmentalist consensus, food continues to be distributed around the globe day in and day out. Free meals change hands at soup kitchens, at places of worship, among neighbors, and at urban community fridges. In what follows, I tell the story of a particular space of food distribution, one grounded in an Islamic ethics of care. This space is called a *kbidma*, which literally means “service” in Arabic. At first sight it seems straightforward: food is served to people. But the term *kbidma* also contains another dimension. A spiritual economy runs alongside the visible, social, material exchange. The *kbidma* is not only about one person giving, another person receiving, and a meal changing hands. It is also and centrally about God. By examining how the idea of “serving God” orients and shapes the gifting of food at the *kbidma*, I show how an Islamic ethics of care disrupts a secular humanitarian logic.

The particular *kbidma* I want to tell you about is located in Cairo, and more particularly in the buzzing downtown neighborhood of Sayyida Zaynab. Some middle- and upper-class Egyptians avoid this part of the city because they find it too crowded and unruly. Others seek it out specifically to visit Sayyida Zaynab after whom the neighborhood is named. At the heart of the neighborhood is the mosque in which Sayyida Zaynab, the Prophet Muhammad's granddaughter, is allegedly buried (see figure 15.1).² The mosque is a site of visitation and intense prayer, with hundreds of people imploring Sayyida Zaynab every day for intercession with God. The space is heavy with affect: worry, grat-



Figure 15.1. • Sayyida Zaynab mosque in Cairo, 2020. © Amira Mittermaier

itude, and hope. The mosque is also a site of distribution. Inside and outside its walls, pious givers distribute food and drink; some hand out sandwiches, others pour water into cups for those on their way to visit Sayyida Zaynab. One man feeds the feral cats around the mosque every day. The giving around the mosque is constant, and it is both spiritual and material. One of the most committed givers at the Sayyida Zaynab mosque was Shaykh Salah, who used to serve free meals twice a day to whomever extended their hand. This was his *khidma*, his act of serving.³

Shaykh Salah's daily giving at the mosque occurred in the midst of a city marked by extreme social inequality and filled with humanitarian actors. Besides the Egyptian Medical Syndicate, Médecins du Monde, the Red Crescent, the UNFPA, and UNICEF, there are countless Egyptian NGOs, including many Muslim and Christian organizations.⁴ One of the most active and visible humanitarian actors in Egypt used to be the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamist oppositional movement that was banned in Egypt in the wake of the 2013 military coup. The Muslim Brotherhood's humanitarian orientation was both inspired by the actions of Christian missionaries in Egypt and based on Islamic traditions that foreground the rights of the poor.⁵ Like many other Islamist organizations, the Muslim Brotherhood used to run free or low-cost clinics and provided aid to low-income Egyptians across the country. In 1992,

after an earthquake in Cairo killed over 550 people and injured nearly 10,000, it took the government over a week to provide relief. In contrast, within hours of the event, the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic organizations had come to help.⁶

The Red Crescent and Muslim Brotherhood are obvious players to be included on a map of humanitarian actors in Egypt. But there are also others who give, often day by day, but whose forms of care fit less easily into a frame of humanitarianism, among them Shaykh Salah and his *kbidma*. *Kbidmas* are more closely connected to Sufi traditions than to Islamist politics. A quiet space of giving, the *kbidma* is situated outside of the logic, infrastructure, and rhetoric of humanitarianism. And it is from this location—from the margins of humanitarianism—that I want to reflect on possibilities of care that continue to exist in the time of humanitarianism but that are not exclusively centered on the “human.” Shaykh Salah’s *kbidma* is an evocative site from which to think about, beyond, and against the ethos of humanitarianism. The *kbidma* pushes back against habituated assumptions about what good, effective, sustainable, or truly compassionate care should look like. In particular, it lays bare the anthropocentric logic (and limits) of humanitarian reason. It allows us ask: When the human is the only actor we see, what do we overlook? What other forms of care might exist in the world? Which ideas of justice are at play in such spaces of care? Sticking closely to the *kbidma*, this chapter offers insight into a religiously grounded form of care that is centrally oriented around God.

Shaykh Salah was ostensibly serving Cairo’s poor. At the same time, he was serving God. Hidden from public view, he was deeply immersed in a practice of care without fitting the profile of a humanitarian actor. He did not run, or work for, an organization. He was not registered with the Egyptian Ministry of Social Solidarity or international funding agencies. He did not respond to crises and catastrophes. His work did not ride on compassion. And while he met people’s needs, those who received help from him were neither members of particular groups (such as “migrants and refugees”) nor representatives of “humanity” at large. They were simply people who showed up when he served food. He responded to need in the here and now, not to suffering in an abstract sense. His giving was quiet, and it was directed by and at God. God-centeredness, however, does not erase the human. Shaykh Salah was a deeply human actor, attending every single day to the needs of other humans, all the while refraining from sacralising the human.

The Visible/Invisible Nexus

A former army employee, Shaykh Salah was retired by the time I met him in 2011. A couple of years later he became a widower. He lived in Helwan at the

outskirts of the city and at the end of the metro line. Taking the metro every morning (and learning much about people's needs and Egypt's current issues from the metro ride, as he told me), Shaykh Salah would arrive in the Sayyida Zaynab neighborhood and head toward the small apartment that he rented in a back alley adjacent to the Sayyida Zaynab mosque (the rent was paid by a donor). Then he would go to the market behind the mosque to buy ingredients (with money donated to him), or to the bakery to pick up stacks of discounted flatbread (*'aysh baladi*). After praying at the mosque, he would return to the apartment to begin his daily work of cooking—usually lentils or pasta.

Twice a day Shaykh Salah or his assistant Hassan would use a wheelbarrow to take the big, heavy pots over to the mosque where people were waiting for their daily share. Shaykh Salah would scoop the food onto metal plates and hand them to those lining up.

A homeless man in a wheelchair extends his hand. “Where were you yesterday?” Shaykh Salah asks him.

The next plate goes to a woman from the countryside who is visiting the Sayyida Zaynab mosque. “Eat this! It's a gift (*nafaba*) from Sayyida Zaynab!”

Receiving a plate, one man says, “May God increase [your ability to give]” (*rabbīnā yazīdak yā hāgg*).

The next two plates go to homeless teenage boys. Shaykh Salah knows them well. “How are you today?” he asks with a smile.

He sees me: “Welcome *yā duktūra*, come help me!”

This is not the time for asking questions or for observing. Shaykh Salah hands me a scoop so I can help serve the food. This is a gift too: not the gift of food but the gift of being able to give food. Drawing me into the circulation, Shaykh Salah turns me into yet another medium of giving, helping to channel divine provisions to those who are hungry. These times at the mosque—the moments of distribution—are my most vivid memories of Shaykh Salah: I see him beaming with joy, giving with joy.

No matter what time of year, day of the week, or time of day, whenever I was in Cairo, I could head over to the Sayyida Zaynab mosque and find Shaykh Salah either at the mosque handing out food or in the small apartment cooking, washing dishes, or taking a break. The breaks were spent drinking tea and reading, usually a book associated with the Sufi tradition. Shaykh Salah's *kbidma* became my default field site: whenever others canceled appointments or did not show up, I could visit the *kbidma*. Shaykh Salah was always there. He gave and cared and cooked every single day—not only when he felt like it or during heightened moments of crisis.

While giving for spiritual reasons, Shaykh Salah was not naïve about the world or blind to structural inequalities. He was down to earth, had strong political views, and believed that, to overcome poverty, we need government intervention and to “teach the poor” to become more responsible. In theory, he

thought that teaching a man how to fish is better than giving him a fish. But despite his occasionally judgmental tone and his developmentalist views, in practice he gave every single day. For him, serving food was a spiritual practice, directed *by* God, and ultimately directed *at* God as well. Shaykh Salah dedicated himself to giving not primarily to address human suffering but because he felt called upon by God to give and because he understood food to be a divine right. On the surface, Shaykh Salah seemed to be serving people: the homeless, street children, people from the countryside who had come to Cairo to pay a visit to Sayyida Zaynab, street vendors, the young policemen from the police station at the Sayyida Zaynab Square in search of a free lunch. And yet, if we situate his logic of giving at the interface of the visible and invisible (as he himself would), then he was not only serving people. He was serving God as well as Sayyida Zaynab.

Sayyida Zaynab, one of the daughters of Ali, the fourth caliph (and first Shia imam), and of Fatima, daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, died in 682 CE. But more than thirteen hundred years later, she was present as ever for Shaykh Salah, and she is present to those who visit her to ask for her intercession with God. As other members of *abl al-bayt* (literally, the “people of the house”), those who were close to the Prophet Muhammad, Sayyida Zaynab partakes in a world of justice and care that exceeds a this-worldly frame. Members of *abl al-bayt* are called upon to intercede with God when people face adversities, including when they feel let down by worldly authorities.⁷ Hundreds of people come to the Sayyida Zaynab mosque every day to call for her intercession or to thank her. Having suffered much during her lifetime, she is said to be particularly receptive to women’s afflictions.⁸ Shaykh Salah’s *kbidma* was closely tied to her mosque and to Sayyida Zaynab’s guidance. He followed a divine directive that was mediated by Sayyida Zaynab. She appointed him, put him to work, and made sure donors were directed his way so that he could continue his work of giving.

A widower, Shaykh Salah was actively pursued by two women who wanted to marry him. Even though he was not opposed to the prospect, the marriages did not occur because the women literally could never reach him. One would try to visit him, driving in from the countryside, and every time her car would break down. The other, who lived in Saudi Arabia, died suddenly—before she could convince Shaykh Salah to marry her and relocate. Shaykh Salah attested that a second marriage was not meant to be; “I belong to Sayyida Zaynab,” he told me.

Rethinking the “Human” in Humanitarianism

Shaykh Salah was oriented toward God, the Prophet Muhammad, and the Prophet’s saintly descendants (*abl al-bayt*), first and foremost among them

Sayyida Zaynab. As he often reminded me in our conversations, the most important dimension of his giving could not be observed. But while embedded in an invisible, spiritual economy, and ultimately directed by God, Shaykh Salah was not oblivious to people and their suffering. One day when I visited him, he was noticeably tired. I asked if he wasn't feeling well. He told me he was suffering from high blood pressure and, to treat it, had drunk lots of hibiscus tea (*karkadeeb*) the previous night, which in turn kept him up all night as he had to use the washroom every hour.

Why was his blood pressure so high? I asked.

Because of his work: he carries the “worries of people and of the country.” He feels with the poor, he told me.

Shaykh Salah's daily giving unfolded in a context of extreme social inequality—a context with which he was intimately familiar through his metro rides and through his daily contact with the vendors, homeless, and downtrodden around the mosque. When I first met him, in the immediate aftermath of the 2011 revolution, this same context had driven hundreds of thousands of people into the streets to call for “social justice” and, literally, for “bread.”⁹ While the Egyptian state had been offering some social welfare programs, many low-income Egyptians felt let down by the state. Much day-to-day support in Egypt came (and continues to come) through informal channels, NGOs, neighborhood networks, mosques and churches, and spaces such as Shaykh Salah's *kbidma*. The kind of giving enacted by people like Shaykh Salah—daily, no conditions attached, and not directly affected by what is happening in the political sphere—allows those struggling in Egypt to get by, or at least not to go hungry.

Shaykh Salah started his *kbidma* during the era of President Mubarak (1981–2011) and continued giving throughout most of the Egyptian uprising (2011)—except for a couple of days when the streets felt unsafe, and he stayed home. He gave under Muslim Brotherhood president Mohamed Morsi (2012–13) and continued giving under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (2014–present). He had opinions about these political shifts, but they did not affect his work. Ultimately, the world of politics receded into the background when Shaykh Salah did what he felt called upon to do: cook and distribute meals. The *kbidma* functioned outside of the realm of politics. It was not driven by political interests, and it did not ride on political convictions. It enacted a giving that comes from God and is directed by Sayyida Zaynab. The way Shaykh Salah described it, the entire area around the Sayyida Zaynab mosque exceeds the realm of worldly politics—or more specifically, the last time we spoke, it was “outside of [President] Sisi's rule” (*kbārig 'an bukm al-Sīsī*). In this sphere, Sayyida Zaynab rules.

Because of its seemingly apolitical orientation to an Elsewhere, the *kbidma* was not subject to the kind of skepticism with which the charitable work of the Muslim Brotherhood was met over the years. Critics of the Islamist organiza-

tion, already before the 2011 uprising and before the 2012 elections, worried about it expanding its network and political reach via its charitable activities: charity as a tool for buying votes. Such skepticism could less easily attach itself to Shaykh Salah's *kbidma*, which was not pursuing political or personal gains, at least not in this world. The *kbidma* was unaffected by changes in the political landscape, and it did not enact a politics of "humanity." As such, Shaykh Salah also never became caught up in weighing the suffering of humans or trying to determine deservedness. He gave to whomever showed up, unlike many Islamic charitable organizations in Egypt (and elsewhere) that extensively debate questions of deservedness. NGOs ask: Can Muslim *zakāt* (alms) funds be spent on non-Muslims in need? Does channeling funds to Somalians, Palestinians, or Syrian refugees make sense when there are citizens of one's own country suffering? Should we first help those close by? How do we prioritize among all those in need? Unfazed by such questions, Shaykh Salah trusted that those who showed up at the *kbidma* were guests that had been sent by God. He did not pursue grand this-worldly goals such as eradicating suffering or putting an end to poverty. He simply gave.

Unlike the Muslim Brotherhood, which faced mass arrests, exile, and organizational breakdown after the military coup in 2013, Shaykh Salah continued giving. He fell under the radar of the state because he did not trade in the realm of politics. The only times when government interventions affected him was when the mosque's hours were shortened and when, during the COVID-19 pandemic, "gatherings" (*taḡammu'āt*) were forbidden around the Sayyida Zaynab mosque. Shaykh Salah responded to the latter crisis by handing out food in small plastic bags so people could eat elsewhere.

Throughout, the *kbidma* fed people. And yet, in Shaykh Salah's own understanding, the *kbidma* was just as much about a divine imperative as it was about human need. God-orientedness does not cancel out human-orientedness but leads to a different ethics, one that decenters the human. What we witness at the *kbidma* is not *humanitarianism*, but a God-centered ethics of care: Shaykh Salah gives to God, and God gives through him. Foregrounding the God-centered logic of the *kbidma* helps undo the fetish of the human that organizes humanitarian reason. Simultaneously, it helps undo the focus on crises that lies at the heart of humanitarianism. Shaykh Salah gave day after day—quietly, repeatedly, persistently. He was not responding to worldly events; he was responding to God.

Submitting to God does not mean being passive. In Shaykh Salah's case, it meant acting consciously and intentionally. It meant hard work. He got up early every day, took the metro, and spent his days cooking, distributing meals, and doing dishes. The extensive labor behind his giving distinguishes it from less embodied forms of charity, such as transferring money via a mouse click to a *zakāt* fund. Shaykh Salah often emphasized that actions matter. He noted

that on Judgment Day, it will not be about what you believe or know but about what you *did* in the world. That is also the reason why contributing one's labor—actively assisting Shaykh Salah—is better than just giving him money. In his words, “If someone comes and gives me money, that's good. If he brings me food, better. If he helps me cook, better. If he helps distribute, better. If he washes the dishes, even better!” Shaykh Salah implied that people's actions have consequences in the afterlife and in this world. God punishes and rewards long before Judgment Day.

One day, while taking a brief break from cooking, Shaykh Salah, an avid reader, read to me a hadith (prophetic saying) from a classic on Islamic ethics, al-Sha'arani's *al-Minan al-Kubra*, which he was studying at the time. The hadith had been preoccupying him. It says that people get the ruler they deserve. He explained:

If people are bad, they get a bad ruler. During [president] Hosni Mubarak's time, people were selfish and had bad morals. The rich kept everything for themselves. It's okay to feed yourself and to have a home, but you shouldn't hoard money while there are poor people. . . . So God sent Mubarak. And it's like that around the world. There are signs of *Yawm al-Qiyāma*, Judgment Day. The coronavirus too. We're not in charge. We're being watched closely.

Once again, Shaykh Salah was not oblivious to politics, and he had his own take on what occurred in the political sphere. In his reading, President Hosni Mubarak, who was forced out of office during the Egyptian uprising in 2011, had been sent by God as a form of divine punishment in response to the Egyptians' bad morals and selfishness. In bringing the hadith to bear on worldly events (presidents and pandemics), Shaykh Salah emphasizes human agency and at once effaces it. If we make bad choices and act irresponsibly, we will be punished. Our actions have consequences. At the same time, we're not in charge. Shaykh Salah was not alone in reading the COVID-19 pandemic as a divine warning.¹⁰ To me, his account was another reminder of how, in his view, human actions matter a great deal and are subject to divine reward or punishment. How we act matters even though we are never fully in control. Shaykh Salah lived this paradox to the fullest, giving every single day without taking credit for his giving. While looking to God, he cared deeply and acted accordingly.

Humanitarianism and Its Discontents

How might we place Shaykh Salah's *kbidma* in conversation with humanitarianism? What kind of critique of humanitarianism emerges from this space?

Originally a theological term that emphasized Christ's human nature, *humanitarianism* since the 1830s has come to refer to the belief that a person's

highest duty is to advance the welfare of humankind. Didier Fassin identifies “humanitarian reason” as a key ethos of our time and describes it as a set of moral sentiments organized around the suffering of others and the desire to remedy it.¹¹ Characteristically, humanitarianism focuses on crises—earthquakes and other catastrophes—but it is also at work in the bureaucratic dispensing of welfare directed at immigrants, refugees, the homeless, the unemployed, or the poor. At the heart of humanitarian reason is the human. In Arabic, humanitarianism is most commonly translated as *insāniyya*, a term that can also mean “humanity” and “humanism.” Again, the *insān*, or humankind, takes center stage.

Critics have highlighted limits and blind spots of humanitarian reason. Didier Fassin notes that humanitarianism rides on the mobilization of empathy rather than the recognition of rights; it can erase or efface questions of justice.¹² Others point out that, while in theory humanitarianism has a global reach, it works through exclusions: not all suffering moves us; not all lives count equally.¹³ Compassion is tricky, fragile, and selective. At the same time, the invocation of humanitarianism (particularly its global appeal, tied to the logic that we are all united by our shared humanity) can become the ground for military action. Talal Asad highlights the violence built into humanitarian logic.¹⁴ Medieval theologians invested the crusades with *caritas* (love, benevolence, charity), and we find a continuation of this uneasy link in manifestations of “post-Christian military humanitarianism.” Asad stresses that this is not a perversion of genuine humanitarianism but another articulation of its impulses. We might also think here of US forces marching into Afghanistan in 2001 under the banner of “saving Muslim women.”¹⁵

Humanitarianism is by no means limited to players from the so-called global North or the “West.” Humanitarianism, and with it “globalizing rescue industries,” are also at home in the global South.¹⁶ They can build on, and merge with, other histories of charity, including Islamic ones. Scholars have described non-Christian and nonsecular genealogies and trajectories of humanitarianism, including through nuanced accounts of Muslim humanitarianisms.¹⁷ Others have written about a neoliberalization of Muslim forms of care, or about how *zakāt* (almsgiving) has been turned into a development tool.¹⁸ These works remind us that Islam is not a sealed-off, static tradition, and that it is certainly not by definition antihumanitarian.

What attracted my ethnographic and analytical attention during my fieldwork, however, was a different form of giving—the kind that we find at the *kbidma*. This kind of giving is not neoliberal, is not about helping the poor help themselves, or about development. But neither is it about compassion or a humanitarian impulse. It is a form of giving that involves God as an active player. Through Shaykh Salah’s embodied practice, we can see what forms of care become possible when giving is not organized around the logic of the “human” and “humanity.”

Shaykh Salah gave every day. He did not give to a particular group of people, and he never questioned whether those receiving his meals were deserving. He also did not care about being seen as good or charitable—about performing a certain kind of goodness. In fact, in the divine logic he embodied, your left hand is not supposed to know what your right hand is giving, and you are not supposed to worry about, or cater to, potential donors who might support your charitable work, including, in his case, those who pay the rent for the apartment in which he cooks, and those who pay for the ingredients.

From within a material and worldly frame we could ask questions about the *kbidma*'s sustainability, and we could trace the ways in which Shaykh Salah's spiritual work effectively relied on other people's monetary contributions. To him, however, the donations were part of the spiritual economy he inhabited. He relied on donations to keep the *kbidma* running, but the spiritual logic of the *kbidma* circumvents, and pushes back against, the elevation of human donors. As Shaykh Salah often explained to me, you are supposed to trust that God will send people your way—both donors and those who receive your gifts. That is also why you should always keep everything in circulation. There is no need to store food or keep backup meals in the fridge. Trusting that God will provide is what keeps the *kbidma* running.

Humanitarianism's concern for sustainability, or for ultimately bridging relief to development, falls to the wayside within a logic of giving that seeks to submit to God and trusts in God's provisions. Conversely, while money is needed to keep the *kbidma* running, all material and monetary exchanges in such a space are already subsumed within a spiritual economy.

(Beyond) the End

By emphasizing the God-centered-ness of the *kbidma*, I do not mean to suggest that God and human are radically opposed. Shaykh Salah was God-oriented and embodied a godly ethics, but he was also deeply human. He cared about those to whom he gave, and he had a frail body that suffered from high blood pressure and that was eventually killed by a virus. Shaykh Salah died on 18 January 2021, having contracted COVID-19—likely while distributing food at the mosque.¹⁹ About a year earlier, the last time I saw him, he told me that it makes no difference to him whether he is “above or below the ground” since he was waiting to meet “our lord” (*rabbīnā*).

Whether his *kbidma* could be labeled humanitarian was not a question that preoccupied Shaykh Salah. It is a question that I brought to (or imposed onto) his space of giving—inspired by the larger project of rethinking humanitarianism(s) represented by this volume and the workshop that preceded it. Ultimately, this is not a matter of “yes” or “no,” but it is a question that can invite

us to rethink our categories. Looking closely at different forms of care, aid, and welfare can destabilize the lines commonly drawn between charity, development, and humanitarianism.²⁰ As Erica Bornstein notes, most scholars of humanitarianism would say that sponsoring the education of an orphan or giving to beggars is different from international humanitarian aid, but in her reading, these forms can be linked through the concept of the gift.²¹ Destabilizing conceptual lines is important because it disrupts certainties about which forms of care are needed in the world today, including the common claim that we should shift from “charity” to “development”—the idea that teaching people to fish is better than giving them fish—or the idea that humanitarianism, with its orientation toward the abstract category of “humanity,” is better than forms of aid that prioritize those close by.

One option for engaging critically with “humanitarianism” is to loosen our terms and to bring unlikely spaces like the *kbidma* into a broadened frame. Another option is to let such spaces push back against the very logic of humanitarianism. I lean toward the latter option. In my view, Shaykh Salah’s form of care cannot neatly be subsumed under even a widened framework of humanitarianism. Shaykh Salah was not a believer in “humanity” but a believer in God. His logic of serving (*kbidma*) partakes in the same pious grammar that includes the logic of submission (*islām*) and worship (*‘ibāda*), etymologically related to the term *slave* or *servant* (*‘abd*). Shaykh Salah’s giving was joyful and heartfelt, but it never relied on compassion. Just as important, the *kbidma* did not displace justice. It was squarely about rights—not legal rights but Quranic ones, and more specifically *haqq al-faqr* (literally, the right of the poor), the idea that the poor are entitled to a share of the wealth of those who are better off. Shaykh Salah believed that we all owe to God (all wealth comes from, and belongs to, God) and that we owe to the poor. He would often say, “I don’t do this for divine rewards [*basanāt*]; I do it because I owe to God, and I owe to the people.” By giving to the poor, you make up for personal shortcomings, for having treated others unfairly, even unintentionally.

It is easy to poke holes in any form of care. From a critical point of view, Shaykh Salah’s *kbidma* is shortsighted. The food he provides is a mere drop in the ocean. Handing out meals perpetuates dependencies. While such criticism is within easy reach, I suggest pausing the critical impulse, at least temporarily, and asking what we might be able to learn from practices of care that unfold outside of the humanitarian matrix. My point is not to romanticize a religious logic of giving but to invite us to consider how such other forms of care disrupt the very logic of humanitarianism.

I deem this an important exercise because humanitarianism comes with its own blind spots. Not only can it privilege some humans in need over others (let alone humans over other beings); it can itself function as a ground for inclusion or exclusion in the category of humanity. Frequently, when I present

on Muslim forms of care that I encountered during my fieldwork in Egypt, audiences deem them too selfish (instrumentalizing the poor to collect points for a place in paradise), or shortsighted (a “drop in the ocean”), or lacking compassion (giving because of a divine imperative, not because one truly cares). It is easy to dismiss other forms of care as uncaring or careless. By taking us into the logic of the *kbidma*, I hope to have suggested a different reading. The *kbidma* does not ride on human compassion, and it does not primarily respond to human suffering. But instead of reading it as lacking, we can consider how its form of care destabilizes the “human” in humanitarianism and points to other forms of care, including ones that are directed from and toward an Elsewhere. The *kbidma* disconnects care from crises and catastrophes, and it disrupts the dichotomy of empathy/justice.²²

Ultimately, the *kbidma* is not about overcoming poverty. It is about divinely mediated circulation. While providing food to those who are hungry, the *kbidma* decenters the human. The human is not the object of its intervention, and human sentiment or reason do not provide the ground for its form of care. In a world saturated with humanitarian reason, the *kbidma* reminds us that other forms and spaces of care persist. Today Shaykh Salah’s legacy is carried on by Hassan. A humble man and proud father of two toddler girls, Hassan used to assist Shaykh Salah, and he quietly took over the *kbidma* after his death. The giving continues. After all, the *kbidma* was never about Shaykh Salah as a person. It is about divine provisions and about Sayyida Zaynab making sure those around her mosque are fed.

Amira Mittermaier is professor of religious studies and anthropology at the University of Toronto. She is the author of the award-winning *Dreams That Matter: Egyptian Landscapes of the Imagination* (University of California Press, 2010), and of *Giving to God: Islamic Charity in Revolutionary Times* (University of California Press, 2019). Seeking to map out Egypt’s post-2011 Islamic landscapes, she is currently working on a project titled “An Ethnography of God.” This project also asks about the methodological, conceptual, and political stakes of making space for God in anthropology and ethnography.

Notes

1. Offering a critique of what he calls “the world’s most widely circulated development cliché,” James Ferguson reminds us that getting everyone to fish might not be the best way forward. It assumes that there are endless jobs for fishermen and endless amounts of fish in the world’s oceans. It addresses only men and assumes that all these men are able-bodied. By tracing the effects of basic-income programs, Ferguson asks us to think away from the productionist paradigm. Ferguson, *Giving a Man a Fish*.

2. Others insist that Sayyida Zaynab is in fact buried in a suburb of Damascus, Syria. Regardless of whether the shrine in Cairo houses Sayyida Zaynab's body, the mosque is a buzzing site of visitation.
3. In this chapter I revisit my longstanding fieldwork with Shaykh Salah between 2011 and 2020, also drawing on additional visits and conversations I have had with him since completing my book on charity. Mittermaier, *Giving to God*.
4. In Egypt, humanitarian actors have included those dedicated to a colonial "civilizing mission," and others who have sought to use humanitarianism as a tool of decolonization. Möller, "Questioning the Civilizing Mission"; Framke and Möller, "From Local Philanthropy."
5. Baron, *Orphan Scandal*; Qutb, *Social Justice in Islam*.
6. Sullivan, *Private Voluntary Organizations*, xiii; Benthall, "Charitable Activities," 2–7.
7. Adly, "Saint, the Sheikh, and the Adulteress"; Reeves, "Power, Resistance."
8. Abu Zahra, *Pure and the Powerful*.
9. "Bread, freedom, social justice" was a key slogan during the Egyptian 2011 uprising.
10. Embaby and Mittermaier, "God in Times of Uncertainty."
11. Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*.
12. Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*.
13. Butler, *Precarious Life*; Butler, *Frames of War*.
14. Asad, "Reflections on Violence."
15. Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?"
16. Amar, ed., *Global South to the Rescue*.
17. Benthall, *Islamic Charities*; Iqbal, "Theorizing Humanitarianism"; Mostowlansky, "Humanitarian Affect."
18. Atia, *Building a House*; Taylor, "Reflections on a Theory."
19. A neighbor of the *kbidma* reported to me that, in fact, none of the people around the Sayyida Zaynab mosque contracted COVID-19 since they were protected by Sayyida Zaynab, and that Shaykh Salah must have contracted the virus from neighbors at his apartment in Helwan.
20. Mostowlansky, "Humanitarian Affect."
21. Bornstein, *Disquieting Gifts*.
22. Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*.

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