complex empire. The Successor to the Prophet, sometimes even more problematically referred to as the Successor to God, became increasingly ignorant about religious matters core to the Muslim umma. Until the golden age of the ‘Abbasid Empire, the caliphs Harun al-Rashid and al-Ma’mun had the religious and political capabilities and competencies to coordinate and impose their identity, causing, however, some controversies. These two caliphs maintained an absolute power, combining both the religious and the political. Thereafter religious and political deficiencies emerged, highlighting the lack of personal skill in controlling the dark eminences of the court and of the army.

The regression of authority in Islam is not due to the end of the prophetic role but rather to the excessive fragmentation and divisions within the Islamic community that followed.

Marco Demichelis

See also: Politics, Qur’anic; Rashidun; Shi’ism

Further Reading


CHANSON DE ROLAND

See Song of Roland

CHARITY AND POVERTY

The concepts of poverty and charity were very far-reaching in the beginnings of Islamic history. Considerable importance has recently been attributed to charitable
practices in early Islam within the geographical context of the Arabian Peninsula. There are nevertheless some problems with the sources available on this subject. We do not have contemporary documented evidence at our disposal regarding the circumstances that are retold, and added to this, the archaeological material is incomplete. This is why we depend to a great degree on narrative sources written in Arabic during the Islamic period in reference to both pre-Islamic Arabia and the Arabia of the early days of Islam.

Apart from the Qur’an (the text that the Prophet recited as the revelation of God), put into writing no later than the reign of Caliph ‘Uthman (656 CE), the main sources available to us regarding the life of Muhammad and of the first original Muslim community are narrative texts dated no earlier than the eighth century. These texts came down to us through a process of literary transmission as the result of work by scholars who lived at a later date and reproduced earlier sources, now lost to us. Some contemporary researchers hold that these documents offer conflicting versions because they were influenced by literary stereotypes. Others affirm the opposite, maintaining that such sources contain a significant body of reliable historical information.

The study of poverty, charity, and generosity in the early texts is important for gaining an understanding of the transition from the *Jahiliyya* (the pre-Islamic pagan period in Arabia) to the formation of early Islamic society. In Arabia prior to the rise of Islam, a wide variety of redistributive practices existed. Islamic charity is in part an extension of the old Arabian economy of gift, since the pre-Islamic values of generosity came to be institutionalized in the different forms of Islamic charity. From this perspective, there is a connection between the redistributive practices of the pre-Islamic era and those of Islam. Pre-Islamic Arabic poetry and prose exhort those who have a surplus of wealth to hand it over partly or in its entirety to the poor. The pre-Islamic idea that any property contains a surplus that the owner must part with receives a parallel mention in the Qur’an (70:24, 51:19), which states that the demands of the poor for surpluses of wealth are just.

During the *Jahiliyya*, there existed a structure of social solidarity. It was believed that hierarchy in society fitted in with an established order and that the wealthy had an obligation to help the needy. While the poor benefited from the charity they received, the rich capitalized on this through a reduction in social tension, with their place in society justified as benefactors of the less fortunate. Charitable acts were perceived as a stabilizing element and contributed to maintaining the hierarchical social order. In this context, some traders distributed their profits among the needy in the clan. Likewise, the sacrifice of camels and the distribution of their meat constituted a medium for attracting loyal followers.

Although it cannot be denied that some local pre-Islamic charitable practices intervened in the formation of Islamic charity, traces can also be found in the latter part of the legacy that Islam was influenced by other monotheistic religions in the Near East and Mediterranean areas. Evidence exists of the role performed in this regard by the charitable impulses contained in the Old and New Testaments of the Jews and Christians of Medina. It was in this locality that Muhammad passed the rest of his life after the Hijra (the migration of Muslims to Medina from
Mecca in 622) as head of the then-emerging Muslim community. He might therefore have taken that model to carry out the charitable principles contained in the Islamic religion. Similarly, he might himself have gotten to know the charitable practices of Judaism and Christianity during the trips of his youth to Syria and other places.

Since the dawn of Islam in the seventh century, the exhortation to beneficence has taken the material shape of concrete practices that have adopted different forms. Compulsory alms-giving (zakat) is one of the five religious precepts of Muslims. Likewise, jointly with zakat, the Qur’an, and the hadith (accounts of sayings and actions of the Prophet) urge believers to practice voluntary alms-giving (sadaqa), reminding them how much God values charitable work. Both zakat and sadaqa are purposely aimed at God, although they directly affect the individual.

The social impact of one has much in common with the other, since both reinforce the identity and cohesion of the Muslim community by providing material assistance to its least protected members. However, unlike sadaqa, zakat is an obligation that Muslims have to God. Indeed, it came to form part of the tribute system of the Islamic state in its early days. Zakat is a mechanism for collecting and redistributing wealth through which Muslims are obliged to be responsible toward their coreligionists. In general, zakat and sadaqa are acts that were carried out discretely. When the payer gave alms directly to the recipient, the action was practically invisible, since scarcely any traces were left in the historical records. Sadaqa and zakat provided the basic core for the theory and practice of charity, including later developments such as the Islamic donation system of waqf.

At the beginning of the prophetic career of Muhammad in Mecca, insistence is laid on charitable acts more than on any other action. Historical narratives concerning the early days of Islam furnish anecdotes regarding the recommendation of charity by the Prophet. It must be kept in mind that Muhammad was an orphan who knew hardship in his childhood and youth. Years later when he started to receive divine revelation, he gathered a community around him in Mecca that
included individuals from different social backgrounds, some of whom were in dire straits. That is perhaps why his revelations during this period place special emphasis on generosity and alms-giving. The poor were likewise the subject of attention in narratives toward the end of the Prophet's life. It is illustrative that in his last military campaigns, numerous members of the community were not able to supply themselves with the necessary equipment (saddles, weapons, and provisions), so some individuals contributed through donations of these objects to the participation of others in the activities of warfare.

In the same regard, the Qur'an recommends *sadaqa* so insistently that some verses (58:12–13) make exhortations for this to be put into practice as a concrete act before a private audience with the Prophet. The founding Islamic texts also report that *zakat* was collected during Muhammad's life, although it was institutionalized sometime after the Hijra to Medina. This is how we know that when the Prophet sent his administrators to collect *zakat* for the nascent Islamic political organization, he gave them instructions to take the goods of the rich and return them to the poor. There is an element of what has been termed poverty economy associated with the concept of return. We have already seen that the old Arabic concepts concerning the redistribution of wealth underwent a transformation that gave rise to charitable practices. It is a concept of property that circulated and was purified, to a degree, through charity. Goods were in permanent circulation throughout the community via constant alms-giving. The concepts of purification and return are fundamental. Purification when a poor person is fed or a slave is manumitted is revealed as one of the ways of expiating for a sin or an oath broken. These notions of purification and the circulation of property illustrate a distinctively Islamic way of conceiving charity, generosity, and poverty.

In several parts of the Qur'an, the poor appear, among other categories, as the recipients of distributions. The Qur'an text only offers general principles instead of specific instructions for the distribution of alms-giving. Here it is crucial to bear in mind that during the formative period of Islam, the distinction between *sadaqa* and *zakat* was not applied systematically; this distinction is less clear in the Qur'an than it later became in Islamic law and practice. After the death of Muhammad, Muslim theologists and jurists drew up guidelines for practicing charity correctly so that Muslims could fulfill the precepts of their religion. These guidelines were expressed in the hadith. Many traditions regarding the Prophet make reference to *zakat* and *sadaqa*, offering examples of his life, his family, and his Companions, while they provide textual references for all the Muslim faithful in which charity is insistently recommended to believers. Likewise, in works of *fiqh* and *tafsir* (jurisprudence and interpretation, respectively), scholars and jurists produced an abundant corpus of legal comments as specific guidelines concerning the distribution of alms.

After the death of Muhammad, the collection of *zakat* provoked controversy. Some tribes that had joined the Muslim community during the Prophet's times refused to pay *zakat*, arguing that this tribute had been promised as a personal obligation toward Muhammad. Nevertheless, Muslims considered that payment of *zakat* to the Prophet encompassed his role as leader of the Muslim state, and later this also applied to his successors. They interpreted it not only as a commitment to
the religious obligations imposed by Islam but also as recognition of the transfer-
ence of temporary political authority over the Muslim community from one leader
to another. Payment of zakat did not exist continuously everywhere. In general,
very little is known of its distribution within the Islamic world. It is highly possible
that during the passage of time, the zakat system fell into disuse or was reabsorbed
by other taxes. Among the several researchers who have declared their opinion on
this question, the historian U. Haarmann attributes the failure of zakat to the fact
that it was not sufficiently flexible in its regulations to be able to adapt itself to
changing economic realities so that it was not an effective instrument for alleviating
poverty and redistributing wealth, as part of its original intention. Voluntary acts
of charity generally seem to have exceeded payments of zakat in volume and in
popularity.

Ana Maria Carballeira Debasa

See also: Ethics; Fiqh, History of; Fiqh, Modern Era; Shari‘a and Fiqh; Taxation

Further Reading

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CHIVALRY

Futuwwa is the Arabic term for “chivalry,” which has a meaning connected to the
contemporary, popular sense of polite and honorable behavior, but it goes deeper
than this in meaning. Chivalry is a code of conduct based on religio-spiritual values
for whoever would struggle for a just cause—defending the poor and defenseless
or defending, with weapon in hand, one's homeland. In the West, chivalry arose as
part of the effort of the church during the Middle Ages (11th–12th century CE) to
dowel the lawless armed horsemen of the time with moral values and a spiritual
discipline. In the Muslim world, chivalry as a moral and spiritual commitment is
traced back to the early life of the Prophet.

Connected to the idea of chivalry is that of fighting honorably. The Arabic term
“jihad” is often understood literally as “struggle” without distinction. However, the
word is more nuanced than just this surface meaning. There are two aspects of
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