

The Origins of Zakat

Each year, Muslims worldwide donate hundreds of millions of dollars to Islamic charities as part of their holy obligation. Charitable giving, or zakat, is one of the five pillars of Islam. But what is zakat?

Paul Heck, at Georgetown University's department of Theology, explains.

"The word literally means to grow towards God – that's why it's considered one of the pillars. It's not just charitable action by 'do-gooders.' That's why it's actually a ritual. We wouldn't necessarily think of charity as a kind of worship but it's like prayer and it's like pilgrimage, and it's like fasting – it's something that's considered to allow you to grow towards God. And also to God's community.

Religion doesn't work in the abstract. Religions aren't about abstract ideas. What you do with your body and what you do with your material possessions very much reflects, as it were, the state of your soul. So if you're not giving there's no clear, as it were, evidence that your soul is properly oriented towards God as the absolute. And so by giving a portion of your material possessions you show where your true commitment lies - in what you're willing to give up - but also shows that you're not going to God alone.

I think it's very beautiful. To what extent are we doing this reflectively, pensively? Are we taking this opportunity to give charity as a way to actually explore the state of our soul, whatever that means to us?

...This is the idea – you need to have a certain cautious and even skeptical attitude towards your own wealth, and this is a temptation we all know. Religious traditions in their own way speak to it.

I think it's chapter 25 or 26 of the gospel of Matthew – it's the scene is the final judgment. It's all about service of others – that's the criterion for entering the kingdom, is service of others. There is a hadith that essentially has that exact story. Allah saying the same thing, 'Blessed are you who clothed me when I was naked, who fed me when I was hungry.' You have similar stories from one to another, that Muslims, Christians, other people will be making reference to."

Imam Johari Abdul Malik, of the Dar al Hijara Islamic Center in Northern Virginia, further explains the idea behind zakat.

"The idea of zakat, 2.5% of one's net assets held over a year. That amount is not something that I'm giving in charity. It is actually a part of what belongs to someone else that I am the agent to distribute. It belongs to the homeless person. It belongs to the widow. It is their money and if I don't remove that part from my money, then I contaminate my wealth. If I don't give it, I'm harmed. But if I give it, then my wealth is purified. It is a debt that I owe."