

Poverty and Charity in Middle Eastern Context, edit. Michael Bonner, Mine Ener,
Amy Singer, Albany: State University of New York, 2003. İSAM DN. 145600

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Charity's Legacies

*A Reconsideration of Ottoman Imperial
Endowment-Making*

AMY SINGER

Why Reconsider *Waqf*?

It would hardly be controversial to argue that throughout its history the most powerful formal vehicle for voluntary charitable and philanthropic endeavors in the Islamic world was probably the endowment, or *waqf*. As a form of charity, alms (*zakat*) had primacy of place as one of the five obligations of every Muslim. *Zakat* was assessed annually, at fixed rates, and due in cash or in kind. However, its universal nature did not allow any one person to be recognized as an outstanding contributor. The institutionalization of *zakat* after the death of Muhammad was not uniformly successful and was even undermined at times by the proliferation of state levies.¹ In contrast, the voluntary character of *waqf*, combined with its possibilities for social recognition, fiscal advantage, family benefit, and political profit, reinforced the attraction of this mode of formal giving.²

Large-scale beneficent undertakings might seem by their nature to be relatively immune from criticism. On the surface, endowments seem uniformly praiseworthy, created to sustain institutions that served the broader public. Their benefits to the spiritual, social, material, intellectual, and hygienic condition of the wider population offer no obvious target for rebuke. That they might also benefit the founder and his or her family is neither unusual in a donation nor necessarily blameworthy. Very few charitable or philanthropic acts are entirely selfless; rather, most donors profit from their own contributions, whether the benefits are spiritual or eschatological, or bring them social status, political legitimacy, and acclaim as social or cultural patrons. Endowments that primarily benefited their donors might be regarded as akin to contemporary family trusts. And yet, historical writing about

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01 Mart 2013