“unique” combination of piety and pulchritude that he has encountered in the hadith and fiqh, and his conviction that prescriptive religious sources are our single best guide to social history (largely grounded, it appears, on the fact that he has barely looked at any others), tell us more about his particular focus than about the societies he purports to be explicating.

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The author has written several books on the Middle East in the Fatimid-Mamluk periods and with this book has provided a survey of the ubiquitous nature of charitable institutions in the Arab Middle East, mostly during the eleventh-fifteenth centuries. The title of the work is slightly misleading. “Islam” here is limited to Muslims of the Levant and Egypt and “medieval” includes the Ottoman Empire but only during its early days in the Arab lands, (i.e. after 1517), a period not usually referred to as “medieval.” Nevertheless, the compilation provides an excellent introduction to the subject of Muslim philanthropy and a wealth of data for the Arab world.

Lev has mined Arabic sources for information on charity and presented it under various headings. The work has an introduction and seven chapters, each chapter usefully subdivided. Chapter One, “Charity, Society, and State,” contains discussions of voluntary and obligatory charity (ṣadaqa and zakāt), the beneficiaries of charity and the state payroll as a kind of charity. In this last section he grapples with the often vague references to government stipends awarded to people who did not seem to have real administrative responsibilities. Whether this can be considered as charity in any legal or philosophical sense is an interesting question. His treatment of zakāt might have been enriched by consideration of Ingrid Mattson’s recent work in the edited volume Poverty and Charity in Middle Eastern Contexts (edited by Michael Bonner, Mine Ener, and Amy Singer, 2003), only one of the articles from which is included in the bibliography, though most bear in some measure on the subjects of this book.

Chapter Two deals with the politics of charity and Chapter Three takes up the theme of permanent endowments (awqāf) as a way of perpetuating the objectives of charitable giving. Here he treats the management and administration of endowments largely from the standpoint of the state (i.e. the qādī’s authority over awqāf). The role played by mutawallis (var. nāzirs or amins) in endowment administration is not treated, however. Chapter Four examines the diffusion of endowments in urban contexts and the kinds of institutions supported by endowments.
(mosques, water supplies, and the haramayn). Chapter Five examines the role of endowments in promoting and underwriting education from primary though advanced learning. Chapter Six deals mainly with social service institutions other than the mosque, maktab and madrasa, such as hostels for mystics, hospitals, soup kitchens, funds for ransoming prisoners and for funeral services. The last chapter, “The Wider Context of Islamic Charity,” compares Muslim forms of charity with those found in pre-modern Judaism and Christianity, briefly considers the issue of the longevity of nominally eternal institutions, touches on the occasional conflict of state and charitable institution, and suggests that the purpose of charitable institutions was less to support the poor and needy than to underwrite religious and cultural needs.

The strength of the work is unquestionably the amount of factual material marshaled. Analysis of the material beyond organizing it into topics is less successful. Given the almost overwhelming amount of anecdotal and factual information here, it is not surprising that the author has sometimes found it difficult to generalize from the material. The comments that follow therefore arise from the perspective of the scholarly value of the work. As an introduction to aspects of Muslim philanthropy for undergraduates it is a very valuable contribution. It will also serve as a data-mine for scholars of Muslim philanthropy or as a useful guide to sources on the Fatimid and Mamluk Middle East. However, as a scholarly analysis of the phenomenon of Muslim charity the work is less successful. For example, the statement, “Most women of the ruling circles were not involved in politics …” (p. 31) follows a paragraph in which the political roles of royal women, the wives and mothers of rulers, are emphasized along with their charitable deeds. The examples of women “not involved in politics” also happen to be wives and mothers of rulers and the decision to label their charitable acts as non-political while labeling those included in the preceding paragraph as examples of politically-motivated charity seems somewhat arbitrary. In the acts of charity themselves there is nothing to indicate a political motive in either case, although on the other hand the positions of both “political” and “non-political” women would argue for political motivations in all cases.

There are non-sequiturs, too, when what follows a “for example” does not exemplify the generalization. In discussing the role of the qādī in settling disputes (59–60) the author indicates by a “for instance” that an example of the qādī settling a dispute will follow. Instead what immediately follows is an unreferenced description of an early eighth-century family endowment established by a certain Muslama ibn Mukhlid for the male descendants of his non-Arab clients in which no mention is made of a dispute or the qādī’s role in it. Then this sentence immediately follows: “The pious endowment established by the chief of the Abbasid postal service in Egypt of the late ninth or tenth century belonged to this category, and in it he endowed a tenement block in Fustat for his former slave whom he had raised and educated.” By inference “this category” must now be types of endowments where clients or slaves of the donor are the beneficiaries. We hear nothing fur-