Mona Atia

Building A House in Heaven: Pious Neoliberalism and Islamic Charity in Egypt,

Mona Atia’s Building a House in Heaven offers an innovative ethnographic analysis of shifting religious charitable practices in neoliberal Egypt. In this multi-sited ethnography, Atia introduces us to the phenomenon of “pious neoliberalism,” or “the merging of religious and capitalist subjectivity” (xvi). Atia’s ethnographic focus is coupled with a neo-Foucauldian theoretical framework that examines pious neoliberalism as a form of governmentality that produces “new institutions, systems of knowledge and subjectivities” (xvi). As such, Atia tackles questions that are central to the anthropology of neoliberalism and utilizes the Egyptian case to illuminate this intriguing topic in a non-Western context.

The book is organized around two broad and interrelated themes that together illustrate the complex politics of Islamic charity in Egypt. The book’s primary focus is on the changing ethics, practices, and institutions of charity in Egypt’s rapidly changing social and economic space. The second focus of the book is the tumultuous relationship between the state and Islamist movements. One of the book’s significant merits is that it complicates dichotomies that are often taken for granted: charity versus economic exchange, states versus Islamists, neoliberalism versus welfare. By carefully mapping the charitable landscape in neoliberal Egypt, Atia illustrates the interlinked nature of Islamic charity, finance, and economics and reveals the ways in which the Egyptian state’s attempts to create a “nationalized Islam” has contributed to the rise of Islamism. The second point is notable for its complement to arguments that link Islamism to repressive state policies. In addition, a major comparative contribution of the book is its attention to the ways in which neoliberal welfare regimes often cultivate a private culture of generosity in order to alleviate the effects of market inequalities.

Specifically, this book explores Islamic charity in Egypt by focusing on twenty organizations that have flourished in the urban social space of Cairo, a city marked by increasing inequality due to processes of marketization and privatization. In her analysis, Atia situates the emergence of new Islamic charitable practices as both products of, and as responses to neoliberal capitalism. She argues that Islamic charity organizations can be conceptually and spatially grouped into four main clusters depending on their approach to poverty, aid, need and relationship with the state. In doing
so, the author successfully illustrates that Islamic charitable practices are constantly reimagined and reinvented. Furthermore, by emphasizing how pious individuals rearticulate charitable and economic practices in the context of a market economy, her study contributes to the broader literature on religious neoliberalism.

Atia’s book is divided into six chapters in addition to an introduction and a conclusion. Chapter one situates Islamic charity as a constitutive element of Islamic economics and provides in-depth information about various Islamic charitable institutions and practices such as zakat, sadaqa and waqf. Chapter two turns its attention to state interventions in social welfare policy and Islamist movements and illustrates how the state’s on-going attempts to co-opt Islamism has resulted in a form of religious revival that often relies on the provision of social services in order to garner legitimacy. Chapter three examines the ways in which religious charitable practices interact and often merge with market-oriented solutions, thereby producing an Islamic development paradigm that constructs poverty as a problem of scarcity that can be best ameliorated with an efficient administration of charitable funds and resources. In chapter four, Atia explains how the manifestations of a market-oriented Islamism and the multi-faceted dimensions of Islamic finance and charity are explored in private mosques, Western-style foundations, and within consumer culture. In the following chapter, Atia illustrates how in neoliberal Egypt many charitable organizations view poverty as best addressed via market-based solutions, thereby “applying business expertise to the charitable sector” (107) with a specific push towards professionalization, skills training and accountability. Similarly, Atia examines how market-oriented ethics shapes pious neoliberal subjectivity by drawing from self-help and management science to encourage charitable giving and volunteering among middle and upper middle class Egyptians. The book ends by briefly discussing how pious neoliberalism shaped the 2011 Egyptian uprising.

Each chapter is illuminated with case studies of pious neoliberalism and Islamic charitable institutions, practices, and ethics. These include, among others, the Zahrawan Foundation, a voluntary association that seeks to provide “workfare” instead of welfare to eligible female recipients (106–107); the Mustafa Mahmud Mosque Complex, which avoids giving “hand-outs” and instead focuses “on giving the poor tools and cultivating an ethic of self-reliance” (117). Another organization discussed is Resala, a hybrid social services group that operates a mosque, a hospital, a school, and an orphanage by relying on more than forty thousand volunteers who were recruited via a discourse that combines religion with efficiency and self-satisfaction.