

University of Helsinki

HOLGER WEISS

In April 1999, the University of Helsinki's research project on 'Zakât: poverty, social welfare and Islamic taxation' arranged a two-day workshop, together with the Department of Asian and African Studies of the University of Helsinki, on 'Social justice, social welfare and praxis in Islamic societies in Africa'. Researchers from the Nordic countries and Germany presented papers dealing with issues such as the possibilities of Islamic economy and Islamic banking as well as case-studies of how various forms of social welfare programmes have worked in Islamic communities in Africa (including North Africa). Seven scholars presented papers at the workshop:

Holger Weiss (University of Helsinki, Finland) pointed out that much of the debate in the field of Islamic economics has been dealing with morals and ethics rather than pure economics. He presented in his paper the position of two Nigerian scholars, Sule Ahmad Gusau and Ibraheem Sulaiman, and underlined that most of their writings are critiques of the present military rulers in Nigeria, but are vague in their dealings with social or economic questions.

Endre Stiansen (Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, Sweden) gave an overview of Islamic banking in the Sudan as well as an overview of the network of Islamic economics. He presented the problems connected with *riba* and its translation and reflected upon the

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connection of Islamic economics and John Hunwick's idea of a 'moral economy of salvation'. Stiansen remarked upon the rather divided character of the current debate in the Sudan, where some forms of Islamic banking have been criticized by Muslims themselves.

Ruediger Seesemann (University of Bayreuth, Germany) presented a welfare project run by the Tijaniyya shaykh Ibrâhîm Sidi in El Fasher. The programme is namely one of social rehabilitation for problem children and street kids. He underlined the problems of the insufficient attempts by the Islamist government in the Sudan to improve the living conditions of the northern Muslim population. Instead, the long-neglected social welfare activities of the various Sufi orders are providing an informal social security system.

Knut Vikør (Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, Bergen, Norway) discussed how and why the economic and social effects of the Sanûsiya order was the result of an interplay between choices made by the brotherhood and by the social actors of the surrounding community. The brotherhood's role in providing 'social welfare' was inscribed into this dynamic relationship. For example, the brotherhood provided former

nomads not only with economic aid in terms of lending land for cultivation or handouts, but it also offered symbolic capital by means of attachment.

Tuomo Melasuo (Tampere Peace Research Institute, Finland) gave an overview of the Algerian Ulama Movement and Social Action during French colonialism. The focus of his presentation was on the Ulama Movement's establishment of schools, through which it sought to restore Muslim society in Algeria as well as to improve Islamic civilization. Thus, the Ulama Movement combined a cultural call with social action but was, at a later stage, to have political implications as well.

Franz Kogelmann (University of Bayreuth, Germany) discussed the possibilities of religious-motivated welfare institutions, such as pious endowments (*waqf/habus*) in pre-modern societies. His case study was based on the development of Sidi Fredj in Fez, which was the most important endowment complex in Morocco and had devoted itself exclusively to social welfare activities. He pointed out that under French colonial rule, the pious endowments became more tightly organized and economically efficient. However, the administrative centralization process meant that this

previously highly autonomous form of welfare now fell outside the area of responsibility of the local community.

Roman Loimeier (University of Bayreuth, Germany) gave an analysis of the campaign against the Quranic schools in Senegal between 1992 and 1996. The secular State and global development agencies such as UNICEF, as well as Islamic reformers were united in their attempt to dissolve the existing Islamic system of socialization as maintained by the Quranic schools. They were all of the opinion that the autonomy of the Quranic school as a central institution of Islamic society had to be destroyed and the social and political influence of the marabouts, the established religious scholars, must be eliminated. ◆

The participants of the workshop are revising their papers for a collective volume, which is to be published in late 1999.

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