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Giving in God's name: investing in the ethical self in the case of the *kermes*

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Abstract In this article, I look into a case study of a *kermes* (kermis) to see how Islamic discourses can structure and re-structure an apparently mundane practice. The aim is to see how a mundane activity is transformed into an act of piety, simply because it is driven by a religious intention. Additionally, we study how this intention supported by the articulation of a particular interpretation of an Islamic tradition. Ultimately, the goal is to understand how the *kermes* is converted into a disciplined practice of moral construction, ethical conduct and allows for the fulfillment of religious and non-religious responsibility and, consequently, how a moral discourse can embed a completely mundane practice and transform it into an ethical cycle of self-development, sacred duty and gift giving. This study fills a gap in the literature on volunteering as it examines how practices of volunteering are developed according to a discourse of piety and are the result of a process of active decision-making, according to the context in which the volunteers live. The data for this research was gathered through participant observation and dialogue.

Keywords Volunteering · Gift · Islam · Ethics · Muslim's in Europe

Introduction

On a more or less warm Friday in May, I sat in front of the Golden Rose, the women's association that I had been visiting for over 2 years, waiting for customers to come by and at least look at the products laid out on the table in front of me. They were not really expensive or sophisticated items, just things like handmade notebooks, jewelry and pastries. I was waiting there because I had been present in the *kermes* inside the

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building and one of the women in charge thought that I was far too idle and decided that I should be put to some use by at least tending to the stall outside. I accepted, without having any other option, because when you are working with a group of women like I do, you have no choice but to lend a hand in whatever they are doing. 'I am just an observer' is not an answer that they are familiar with. When you have been with them for as long as I had, they expect you to have transformed into a passive activist, just as they all regard themselves to be in some way or another.

The women I am describing were my interlocutors, all of whom were volunteers[1] from the Golden Rose women's association based in Brussels, Belgium. Most of them were not registered members of the association, but they felt the need, whenever a 'sister' would call them, to know that help is needed and that they were there to provide it. Their connection to the association and with their fellow volunteers is not comprised of a signature in a file on the secretary's desk, but through an undocumented connection to *gönül*, a Turkish word that stands for an abstract place in someone's heart that holds affection. This suggests a tighter bond than any formal membership can guarantee; bonds through *gönül* entail far more demanding obligations, those that cannot be disregarded easily. A derivative of the word *gönül* is the word that stands for 'volunteer' in Turkish; namely, *gönüllü*. In a sense, a volunteer is someone who acts on the premise of their being a place in the heart that generates affection. The act of volunteering must come from the heart, which is in the nature of volunteer work. You cannot be pushed into it, forced into it or expect anything from it; you must possess pure affection for the mission or the act of volunteering will not achieve its goal.

My questions address how mundane[2] voluntary practices are experienced as being enchanted by my interlocutors and where volunteering activity falls in their lives. Furthermore, what is the difference between being a volunteer and being a *gönüllü*? In this article, we shall look into a case study of a *kermes* (kermis) in order to see how Islamic discourse can structure and re-structure an apparently mundane practice. The aim is to see how a mundane activity is transformed into an act of piety simply because it holds a religious intention. Additionally, we shall study how this is supported by the articulation of a particular interpretation of an Islamic tradition Ultimately, the goal is to

[1] The volunteering practices observed in this research can be framed as the collectivist type of volunteering (Hustinx and Lammertyn 2003; Eckstein 2001). Eckstein defines collective volunteering as practices that are "initiated, stipulated, and supervised by groups" rather than by individuals themselves. The volunteer, in this case, is not an "individual actor", but part of a larger body of volunteers. Collective styles of volunteering are duty driven, where the main motivation lies in a sense of responsibility towards the community or the collective body of volunteers. Religious tradition, altruism or a commitment to a greater system of meaning can be embedded in this type of volunteering, where there is a dedication to a "common good" (Hustinx and Lammertyn 2003: 173). It is safe to say that my interlocutors, who come together in the same association to volunteer, prototypically fall under the definition of collectivist volunteering. They identify as Golden Rose volunteers, carry out their practices together, and are always 'in the know' about what others are doing in terms of philanthropy. They can also be regarded as a collective in terms of their religious orientations, which will be developed further in the sections that follow.

[2] I use the term mundane as it is used by Michel de Certeau in his phenomenal book on everyday practices (see de Certeau 1984). De Certeau conceptualizes the everyday as ordinary practices that are part of the daily routine. When I frame a practice as "mundane", I conceive of it as a practice that has no apparent religious disposition. It is not an act of worship (*ibadat*) as Mahmood uses the term (see Mahmood 2005). It is not a set of predetermined ritual practices (such as praying, fasting or visiting the mosque) but instead, as de Certeau suggests, as practices of daily routine such as cooking, eating and shopping.

understand how the *kermes* is converted into a disciplined practice of moral construction, ethical conduct and allows for the fulfillment of religious and non-religious responsibility and, consequently, how a moral discourse can embed a completely mundane practice and transform it into an ethical cycle of self-development, sacred duty and gift giving. I aim to answer these questions by looking into how they morally embed the practice through language and discourse.

The ethnographic data for this study was collected through participant observation. I took a *kermes* (charity sale) as my main field site, and in which I had a chance to closely observe volunteering in its place. The fieldwork for this paper took place in early 2014. This specific *kermes* took part in the Golden Rose, the women's association in Brussels, which I had been visiting for nearly 3 years as part of my academic studies. The members of this association are inspired by the transnational Hizmet Movement,[3] and its founding intellectual Fethullah Gülen.[4] These women meet regularly to discuss their upcoming activities and volunteering aims. There were three focus groups whose meetings I attended on a weekly basis between the years 2011–2015. I also interviewed the volunteers individually, some of whom I have incorporated in this article.

My interlocutors came from both the Flemish and the Walloon regions of Belgium, which was the principal advantage of conducting my ethnographic studies in Brussels, where there is a more hybrid mix of people. The women came from different social strata and different professions, which made it easier for me to observe how they interact when they are stripped of their professional and educational labels and all come under the same title; namely, that of volunteer. The particular event that I was attending was also convenient in the sense that since it was to be held at the weekend, and since it was an event that addressed basically anyone who was hungry, I had one of the rare chances to meet all of the members that I had never met before, because they all came to visit at some point during the event. The association itself is located in the outskirts of the Schaerbeek region of Brussels, making it quite easy to access. It is based in a four-story, elegant building which is rented by the initiators and is used for all kinds of events, lectures, conferences, trainings and other activities.

Volunteering and piety

Volunteering does not have one concise definition; instead, there are several points that scholars commonly believe are intrinsic to the practice. It is acknowledged that volunteering is a giving of time, skill, and labor without the expectation of

[3] Hizmet means "service" and from now on I will use Hizmet with an upper case H to refer to the movement and hizmet with a lower case h to refer to literal meaning.

[4] The Hizmet Movement is a global, faith-based movement which has associations and schools in several parts of the world and carries out philanthropic activities. The Movement is well-known for setting up schools in different parts of the world, including former communist countries and Africa (Park 2007). But its scope is not limited to education, as Gülen is a devout believer in interfaith dialogue and that the world can come together on common humanitarian grounds, regardless of the differences that bring people to the verges of conflict (Sarıtoprak and Griffith 2005). My interlocutors take Fethullah Gülen to be a religious intellectual and read his books to obtain religious knowledge and to empathize with his reasoning. His emphasis on interfaith dialogue and openness is one of the main reasons that inclusiveness is the founding principle of the association. Hence, my interlocutors, who were mostly inspired by Gülen, wished that the association that they had founded to be a center for different people of different faiths and cultures.

reciprocation (Cnaan et al. 1996; Becker and Dhingra 2001; Wilson 2000). It is more generally defined as "informal helping activities" (Cnaan et al. 1996: 366). Cnaan designates that, when it comes to voluntary work, the general perspective is that one should not expect anything in return (Cnaan et al. 1996: 387). One bone of contention, when it comes to volunteering, is that the concept itself cannot be clearly defined and neither can the motives, intentions, or goals. Wilson explains that, because volunteering can have many different forms of motives behind it, scholars cannot come to a common agreement about whether it is one or the other and whether the act can still be considered as volunteering (Wilson 2000). He argues the general consensus is that voluntary activism is carried out to produce "public good" (Wilson 2000: 216); however, there are ambiguities surrounding the definition and scope of what the public good refers to. Moreover, he asserts that motives are the key points of volunteer work; "talk about motives is a key organizing feature of everyday life. Human impute motives —to themselves and to others— and thereby validate or challenge identities, strengthen or weaken commitments" (Broadbridge and Horne 1996: 259). Furthermore, "Motives play an important role in public thinking about volunteerism: Activities that seem to be truly selfless are the most esteemed" (Cnaan et al. 1996: 375). One of the main motives for volunteering is religion. Scholars accept that, "Religious beliefs can influence the meaning of volunteering in people's lives" (Becker and Dhingra 2001: 315). It has been indicated in previous research that the commitment to, and the content of "religious beliefs" are factors that motivate people to volunteer (Becker and Dhingra 2001: 316). This research picks up from this point in order to understand how religion and the disciplining of the self for the sake of pious progression can stimulate the will to volunteer.

Disciplining the soul, as Hugh of St. Victor is quoted by Asad as saying, can be established by the disciplining of the body, be it through ways of dressing, moving, speech and manners (Asad 1993: 138). Based on this assertion, we study how the body is disciplined, in terms of using it for God's service, and how speech is disciplined in order to refer to God as an affirmation of the body's spiritual practices. Asad pays attention to how religion is generally understood as a "transhistorical" and "transcultural" phenomenon that has an "autonomous essence" (Asad 1993: 28). Yet, while religion is accepted as such, as being beyond time and culture, Asad elaborates that, for example, what was recognizable as religious practice in the medieval Christian times was quite different than in modern society (Asad 1993: 29). Consequently he comes to the argument,

> "There cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive process" (Asad 1993: 29).

Asad elaborately discusses the changing forms and practices of religious tradition, whose essence exceeds time and place. In this study, I refer to this conception and argue that my interlocutors, who live in a Muslim minority society, adapt and transform their practices of religious self-disciplining according to the society they share. Different forms of mundane practices, such as volunteering, can be very profound manifestations of spiritual maturity. Spiritual maturity, in common terms piety, in the Islamic context is referred to as *taqwa.* Saba Mahmood, in her canonical work, defines *taqwa* as not only

an "inward spiritual state", but "both an inward orientation or disposition and a manner of practical conduct" (Mahmood 2005: 4). Similarly, I argue that volunteering (however mundane it may appear to be) is a demonstration of the spiritual maturity, as much as praying, fasting and other forms of *ibada*[5] are.

This paper is not the first work in the anthropology of Islam to study volunteering as a practice of piety. In her prominent work, Lara Deeb studies social activism as a form of personal piety (Deeb 2006). Her ethnography, conducted among Lebanese Shi'a women in Southern Lebanon, introduces how these women sacrifice their time to help the poor and how these public forms of social service are seen as a commitment to God (Deeb 2006). Amira Mittermaier has written about volunteering among Muslim youth, mostly in the context of the *Resala* Movement (Mittermaier 2014). In her work she draws a line between giving in the 'secular humanist ethic' and 'giving as a duty to God'. Her argument is that giving in the humanist ethic creates a hierarchy between the giver and the receiver, bestowing the giver with the virtue of giving; in the Islamic tradition, however, because giving is essentially a duty towards God it does not bestow a position to the giver that is above the receiver, and more so indicates a relationship of obedience between the giver and God (Mittermaier 2014). By indicating the distinction of giving between two traditions, Mittermaier opens the door to discussing the dynamics of giving in a tradition other than that of secular ethical traditions. Likewise, I take the concept of giving in the context of a larger Islamic tradition to undertake a discussion of how its relationship with ethical self-development was experienced by my interlocutors.

Taking Deeb's and Mittermaier's works into consideration, it can clearly be seen that voluntary practices are accepted as demonstrations of piety. However, this paper entails a nuance that is unlike the previous two examples, i.e. that volunteering does not take place in a Muslim majority country. The volunteers are Muslims primarily, yet the context in which they publicly practice volunteering is secular and sometimes hostile to public expressions of religion. In this context, the "conceptual and practical resources" offered to women are "recoded … in accord with women's own interests and agendas"[6] (Mahmood 2005: 6). Understanding their minority position (as an ethnic and religious group), my interlocutors frame their volunteering practices in a mundane manner.

The paper proceeds by presenting the context and methodology. Thereafter, I discuss the indications of mundane practice that are regarded as being pious, by looking at language construction. Finally, I analyze the moral implications of volunteering in the framework of "gift-giving", reaching out to both Islamic theology and to anthropological theory. In the following section, I shall link the practice with the concept of the 'gift' by regarding volunteering as a practice of giving by considering how the ethical dynamics of giving in Islam allow a process of ethical self-formation to take place.

[5] Michael Jackson asserts that the way a person behaves is a "validation" of what they know. Correspondingly knowledge is "both gained and given expression" (Jackson 1996: 34).

[6] This definition refers to the concept of agency, which Mahmood elaborates on in her book. She regards agency as "the capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other individual or collective obstacles" (Mahmood 2005: 8).

Islam and Muslims in Europe

Most of the Muslim population in Belgium, not unlike the rest of Western Europe, came about through labor migration (De Raedt 2007; Rath et al. 1999; Kanmaz 2002). There was a massive flow of workers from Muslim countries throughout the 1960s, due to a labor shortage in Europe (Rath et al. 1999). The first generation of Muslim immigrants were welcomed, since they filled a major gap in the labor market and were relatively invisible in social and cultural terms (Rath et al. 1999). The population of Muslims increased over the following decade, due to family reunification as the labor workers established families and settled in Belgium (De Raedt 2007). The increase of the Muslim population, the increase in their level of education in the second and third generations, and even the increase in their social and political participation led to a rise in the perceptibility of Muslims in everyday life (Kılınç 2006; Göle 2011, 2008). The growing needs that accompanied the growing population brought about the establishment of religious institutions such as mosques, halal stores and religious schools (Cesari 2002). The establishment of these institutions also had a profound effect upon increasing the perceptibility of Islam in the public sphere. Alongside the perceptibility of Muslims in the public sphere, international developments also put Islam under a spotlight (Göle 2008). Most of these developments, however, only contributed to sustaining a negative image of Islam and Muslims, such as terrorist attacks and the murders of Europeans critical of Islam (Pashayan 2007: 244). The international discourse of a rising 'militant Islam' was also reflected in the perception of Islam in Belgium, and the far right political discourse that associated Islam with fundamentalism (Kanmaz 2002).

A formation of a discourse of 'otherness' grew around the images associated with Islam and became a source of stigmatization (Casanova 2004; Kanmaz 2002). Islam's visibility, with its special eating requirements such as halal stores, the veils worn by Muslim women, mosques and gender-segregation, soon became the basis for arguments about whether this religious tradition could, in fact, survive in a context of institutional secularism (Casanova 2004; Göle 2003).

Regardless of international and national developments concerning perceptions of Islam, Muslims have also begun to express themselves in multiple domains of everyday life, such as in their music, art and literature, and this has been another factor in the prominence of their religious identity within society (Göle 2002). The increasing presence of Muslims, who are by now not just second or third generation migrants but are born and bred citizens of the countries in which they reside, has led to a considerable amount of research in the social sciences (Moors and Salih 2009; Schielke and Debevec 2012; Eickelman and Anderson 2003; Winchester 2008) into their everyday practices. This current study falls into the volume of literature that studies the everyday, but it focuses on an aspect that is not as often covered; the role of everyday practices on the phenomenon of giving within the Islamic context has yet to be studied in the discipline of anthropology. It is important to understand that although my fieldwork was conducted with Muslim women, most of them had a migration background. They were descendants of labor migrant families, but during the fieldwork they did not seem to place any emphasis upon the fact that they are considered to be a minority religion and ethnic group in Belgium. This was an interesting fact that deserves further consideration, but it is outside the scope of this current study. It is

certainly important to understand the context within which these women try to conduct their practices in order to be able to understand the challenges that face them, the discourses surrounding their visibility and the methods and motives they articulate to overcome them.

Turkish Islamic associations and the Hizmet Movement in Belgium

Most of the Muslim population in Belgium, not unlike the rest of Western Europe, came about through labor migration (De Raedt 2007; Rath et al. 1999; Kanmaz 2002). There was a massive flow of workers from Muslim countries throughout the 1960s due to a labor shortage in Europe (Rath et al. 1999). The Turkish population in Belgium is also largely due to economic migration. Unlike other migrant communities, the Turkish communities in Europe have a strong tendency towards 'associational life' and the main reason for building networks and community ties, by establishing these associations, is the search to maintain cultural-religious identity and to gain social and political recognition (Manco 1997). There are numerous associations in Belgium which have been established by Turkish communities of different backgrounds in Belgium. Some of these associations are inspired by the Hizmet Movement. The aim of this section is to give a brief introduction to the presence of Islamic Movements in Belgium and, hence, to the Hizmet Movement's emergence and development, as well as the associations that have been inspired by the philosophy of the Movement in Belgium.

Although literature on the Movement's development in Belgium is rather limited, it is safe to assume that it took similar, if not identical, trajectory to its development in other Western European countries. Some research has been compiled on the Movement in France and Germany that indicates that the Movement's emergence in Europe occurred somewhat later than other Turkish Islamic Movements (Demir 2007: 355). There are two other prominent Movements in Belgium that attract public attention, the *Diyanet* (the Turkish Islamic Foundation of Belgium) and *Milli Görüş* (the Islamic Federation of Belgium) (Leman 2010; Yanaşmayan 2010).[7] The *Diyanet* is a non-civil movement which is linked to the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Turkey (Yanaşmayan 2010). It was established to protect the separation of the state and religious affairs by enabling the state to, in a way, monopolize religious teaching and conduct in Turkey through an official ministry (Yanaşmayan 2010). Hence, the *Diyanet* has throughout Republican history appointed and financed imams and all kinds of mosque activities in Turkey and in its institutions abroad (Çıtak 2010). The *Diyanet* in Europe very much concentrates on keeping the Turkish cultural element and the knowledge of the Turkish language alive in the younger Turkish-European generations (Çıtak 2010). It is important to keep the mosque, through Turkish sermons and lessons, as 'Turkish as possible', as a place in which members of the younger generations can socialize with their peers in their own ethnic language (Çıtak 2010).

The *Milli Görüş* is quite different from the *Diyanet* in the sense that rather than focusing on any specific common denominators of culture, it adopts a broader

[7] For more information on comparisions between the *Milli Görüş* and *Diyanet*, see Wilson (2000), Secular and Religious Nationalism among Young Turkish Women in Belgium: Education May Make the Difference, in *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 31(3): 333–354.

understanding of *umma* (Leman 2010). It is renowned for being “more involved in negotiation between Muslims and the state and in seeking public recognition while serving the social and religious needs of their followers” (Yukleyen 2010: 446). This movement is well known in Turkey for being a strand of political Islam that is financed and supported by specific, sympathetic political parties in Turkey (Yanaşmayan 2010). However, following its development in Europe, the Movement has shifted its focus from Turkey to the specific needs of Muslims in Europe; it has become more and more concerned about maintaining the Muslim identity in Europe (Yukleyen 2010).

The Gülen Movement came to and developed in Europe and Belgium later than the two movements described above. This movement’s sympathizers recognized the low educational profile of the young people with a migration background and aimed, initially, to address these community’s problems (Demir 2007: 356). The Movement extended its networks and institutions to Europe as it came to be endorsed by a wide population of Turkish immigrants in Europe in the 1990s (Pashayan 2007). Unlike most other faith-based social movements, which are imported from Turkey and reach out to Europe, the Gülen Movement was not institutionalized through mosques or religious educational centers, but through secular schools and cultural centers (Balci 2014). Businessmen who are sympathetic to the Movement and its outlook on education have contributed to the establishment of schools which support a majority population of immigrant children primarily (PEW 2010). The Movement’s endorsers and sympathizers prefer to stay out of heated debates concerning Islam in Europe, such as the headscarf debate; their educational policy is more directed towards helping the integration of the children into the values of the host society at the same time as keeping in touch with the general values of their own faith (PEW 2010; Balci 2014). The most prominent aspect that differentiates the sympathizers of the Gülen Movement from those of the other two is that instead of maintaining their cultural values they open alternative educational institutions that follow the established curriculum of their host societies (Demir 2007).[8] So, despite being a faith-inspired movement, because the educational institutions follow the curriculum of the host society, they follow secular teaching. Although this work does not concern the Movement’s educational strategies, it is important to be acquainted with the knowledge that the Movement supporter’s primary aim is to seek solutions to educational problems.

Enchanted language and disenchanted practice

A *kermes* or kermis, in the simplest sense, is a charity sale. It comes from the French word *kermesse* and designates charity sales that usually take place out-of-doors. As far as I have observed in many different countries and contexts, *kermes* is a very popular way of raising money in the Hizmet Movement. During these events, women, and in some cases men, cook many different varieties of food and pastries and sell them on tables which they organize especially for the occasion.

[8] For more on the educational activities of the Gülen Movement, see Aslandoğan and Çetin (2007) ‘Gülen’s Educational Paradigm in Thought and Practice’ in M*uslim Citizens of the Globalized World*: *Contributions of the Gülen Movement*, Robert A. Hunt and Yüksel A. Aslandoğan (eds), pp.35–61.

While I was attending the Golden Rose *kermes*, I had a 'madeleine memory moment'. I remembered that, as a university student, I used to walk past and even buy from *kermesis* that were organized in the college corridors. There were specific times at which the organization of *kermesis* would reach fever pitch, usually during *eid al-adha*. The obvious reason for this was because the money raised would go towards buying the animals that would be sacrificed and distributed to the poor. Similar *kermesis* are organized all around the world for similar reasons; to raise money for aid of some sort. Having witnessed so many *kermesis* over the years, it only dawned on me how spiritually loaded this activity actually is.

I observed the *kermes* and their preparations for nearly a month. The first 3 weeks were basically the planning process, during which we came together at least twice a week, in the association or in someone's house, to actively discuss how we would go about organizing the event. The women came together to help each other prepare the food and other items, and to arrange how they would spread the news of the event. The final 3 days were the actual *kermes*, during which we spent the whole 3 days in the association.

I had known about the *kermes* nearly a month in advance because it had been the predominant topic whenever my interlocutors got together. My interlocutors come together at least once a week in informal networks in each other's houses. These small get-togethers are known as *sohbet* meetings.[9] It was during one *sohbet* that Elif[10] (the woman who led the *sohbet*) announced that they would organize a *kermes* for which she expected optimum participation. The reason why my interlocutors hosted this particular *kermes* was to raise money for their own association, which had been experiencing some financial problems.

It was scheduled to start on 2 May after the official holiday, I was there early in the morning given that I had promised them that I would help with the preparations. When I arrived, I saw that the women had started the preparations long before the scheduled time. The event was supposed to take place in the dining hall on the first floor of the building. This hall was used for all sorts of large gatherings such as dinners, round-table discussions and seminars. The dining hall, which was also the largest hall in the building, had been arranged so that there were three large tables, one for the hot meals, one for the desserts and the other for drinks. Next to the hall there is a large kitchen in which the members cook for their events, such as the *kermes*. The kitchen was arranged to look exactly like someone's kitchen at home. All the kitchen implements and materials were at the women's disposal and they could use them as they wished during the events.

[9] *Sohbets* are meetings during which five to seven women come together, determine a subject and discuss it, taking a religious book, a video or some other religious text as their reference point. The *sohbet* sessions are seen as gatherings during which they obtain knowledge through active discussion, and explanation of the texts by a leading figure who probably has more experience with the texts than the rest of the women. The leading figure, who is also a woman, may not necessarily have received any formal religious education, but she would somehow have more experience with the texts, and would initiate the discussions and explain about the hermeneutics of them. Sometimes *sohbets* are active, in which everyone participates, or they may be passive and the leading figure would be the only one to speak. For detailed information, see Rausch (2008), 'Progress Through Piety: *Sohbetler* (Spiritual Gatherings of the Women Participants in the Gülen Movement': Conference proceedings, *Islam in the Age of Global Challenges*: *alternative Perspectives on the Gülen Movement*, Georgetown University, Washington, DC.

[10] I have used pseudonyms when referring to my interlocutor's throughout the article.

I could sense the bustle as soon as I stepped into the association on the morning of the *kermes*. There was a conglomeration of women rushing from one corner of the building to the other, making it nearly impossible to notice who was who. There were also many women whom I had never seen in the association. I found out later that these women were mostly housewives who had different *sohbet* groups, some of whom I had not yet found the opportunity to attend.

The kitchen was nearly full of women; four of them were frying fish. The desserts, salads and pastries had been placed to one side of the room. One of my informants, Tuba, had already arrived and was busy with the arrangement of the items. I had been with Tuba at previous events and knew from experience how meticulous she is when it comes to visual appearance and arrangements. I was also familiar with the fact that the other women rely on her to make the event look ‘classy’ and, hence, to make the items more ‘sellable’.

My main interlocutor and *sohbet* coordinator, Elif, was also there that morning. She was instructing the women and making sure that everything was running smoothly; she also cleaned the tables and refilled the emptied plates. There was one woman taking care of the children on the fourth floor of the association while their mothers were busy. At this particular event, I also had the opportunity to meet another *sohbet* coordinator like Elif, whose name was Meral, and who was also very busy with the preparations. The women were so busy trying to get everything together that they barely noticed that I had walked in. Members from very different backgrounds, who are usually grouped according to their professions for the *sohbets*, became intermingled during the *kermes*: all the women worked together regardless of their profession, age or any other personal distinction. I was in the kitchen as a doctor in microbiology was cooking together with a house-wife who only graduated secondary school, and what is more it seems that they both motivated each other to keep working.

Every woman had a duty, and each of their duties had been allocated weeks before, during the *sohbet* meetings. Each of them knew exactly what they were going to prepare for the *kermes* weeks ahead of time, and each of them was going to make something different for each of the whole 3 days. Crates of vegetables and fish had been bought and transported to the association by some of the women’s husbands. Nearly all of the women had baked or cooked something, and those who could not cook took turns tending to the stalls. The distribution of labor was not even, but voluntary; however, everyone who came tried to participate by doing at least one thing.

The *sohbet* meetings, in the 3 weeks previous to the *kermes*, were dedicated to talking about the importance of the event, in the *Hizmet* sense. Elif would start with a small prayer, then read an excerpt from one of Gülen’s books, or open a video sermon of his weekly recordings on the internet. She would then move on to discuss the *kermes* and whether ‘her ladies’ were ready for it, both materially and spiritually. It was important that they were ready for it materially for the simple pragmatic reason that they had to be able to produce sellable items for the lowest cost possible. It was also spiritually important for the reason that the women always had that what they were doing was for God’s sake in their mind. Elif kept on repeating that small or big, whatever their contribution was for the *kermes*, the important thing was doing it with the consciousness that it was being done for God,

> "We all have our individual capabilities and capacities. Some of us have small children, illnesses or we have jobs, which means we may not all be able to contribute in the same way. What matters for Allah is that whatever we contribute, we do it with sincerity and with pure intentions. Sometimes we have so many distractions in life that even the smallest things that we do have a lot of value (Elif)."

Elif was the kind of motivator who did not really push the women to do more than they were willing to, but really to do as much as they were willing to sacrifice for their beliefs. So when I started to observe the *kermes* itself, I was already aware of the spiritual discourse it sought to embed through the *sohbet* meetings. What I came to realize was that the discourse was reflected in the dialogues exchanged between the women throughout the actual practice. Particular meanings reflected in a practice can imply its moral significance, although it may not strike the observer as being specifically moral at the first glance. Practices can be identified through the vocabulary which they are embedded in by "linguistically articulable presuppositions, or conceptual relations that participants in the practice share" (Rouse 2007: 500). I emphasize that in order to grasp the spiritual essence of the practice observed, the language with which my interlocutors chose to embed the practice needs close attention.

One of these concepts were notions linked to the words 'action' and 'motion'. They did not actually use the words 'action' and 'motion' all the time, but particular ways in which they described the situation showed that they always bore in mind that being active was not something to be tired of, but something to be desired. The incident in which I first came to notice this was when one of the older women, Leyla, who was a housewife, told us an interesting story concerning this very point;

> "I have a relative, who goes to the *kermeses* of other religious (Islamic) groups and she once asked me if I could help them with their preparations. I have no problem with participating in other groups' events, so I said yes. I worked so hard that day; I never sat down, not even once. Of course it attracted the attention of the other women and now I hear that they are saying, 'There is a tiny woman in the Hizmet association running to every business when they organize a *kermes* and she still has not dropped ill from fatigue'. But, this is all for Allah right? I mean I would *never* work so hard for my own personal purposes."

When we heard this story, everyone in the kitchen laughed about it and remarked that this is true *hizmet* (also referring to the original name of the movement). This small anecdote that Leyla told us, and she was very happy and proud of herself while telling it, is one of the indications that the more the women work, the more content they are. Every now and then, when they were in deep discussion during the event, the women would assert how being active and occupied made them feel younger and dynamic, and that they were ready to volunteer for longer hours, or to be ready for any sort of event physically and mentally whenever they were needed.

It can be asserted safely that when my interlocutors participate in an event such as a *kermes* and devote a great deal of their physical energy, time and money to it, they do so not just because they see it as a charity event; they participate so eagerly and offer themselves because they also see it as an investment in their morality. This is an area in which it was really important to listen to the words they used when they talked to each other during the *kermes*, because seemingly unimportant everyday phrases can actually say a great deal about the intentions they carry. Phrases such as *Allah rızası için* ('for God's sake/pleasure'), *hayırlara vesile olsun* ('may it lead to prosperity') and *bereket* ('blessing') were used predominantly throughout the activity. Any time there was a crowd, or it seemed that they were making a large profit, one of the women would say something like 'may God bless our profits'. Sometimes, one woman would compliment another by referring to how hard they were working and the other would reply "it is all for God's approval". What is more, if it looked as if were making a low profit, they would urge each other not to lose hope by saying *hayırlısı*, which literally means 'although the situation may look bleak, may prosperity come out of it'. These religious terms which they used to define the intention behind their practice or to motivate each other, indicate that they carry a specific ethical consciousness when they act.

This ethical consciousness also pushes them to invest more and to feel the need for constant personal progress. I had met Tuba by helping her to make five cakes the previous day in the association's kitchen. She made them all by herself beforehand so that they would be ready in time and had time to cool down a bit in the fridge before the sale. While I was making the cakes with Tuba the day before the *kermes*, I asked her how it happened that she had learned to bake so well when she had all the work-load of her PhD studies. Her response was that she could barely cook well before she became an active volunteer in Golden Rose:

> "I did not have the slightest interest in cooking and baking before volunteering. I was a PhD student working on cancer; I never even had time to invest in such stuff, but then, you know, you become part of something and then the situation necessitates you doing some things, because if you don't do it then who will? So after I attended the *sohbets* and took active part in the events, I learned how to bake colorful cakes and coordinate organizations, like, you know, if there is a special event I learned how to prepare the cocktail food and to decorate the rooms. You learn, you learn to develop yourself when you are in a situation where you actually have to".

I asked her what the inner drive that made her want to invest was, and her response was that,

> "This is all for a greater good; I mean this is not a personal hobby, we do it so we have a medium to reach other people. God will see how much we tried to reach other people and show them that we want to communicate with them".

Tuba's emphasis that volunteering is "not just a hobby," is noteworthy. Volunteering is embraced by my interlocutors as being an integral part of their lives. It is vital because it is a channel for their spiritual progress, always pushing them to invest more, rather than being content and settling for what they have already done. The willingness

to invest, however, is crucial to the practice to be considered ethical, based on what I have gathered from my interlocutors. Even with the most mundane practice the element of sacrifice needs to be present. One particular interview where this came out most explicitly was with Pınar,[11] who I interviewed some months after the *kermes*. She explained to me:

> "Giving money is not that hard for me, I can make really big donations and that would not necessarily be difficult. What really strains my limits is giving time. I have three boys and they all have their individual needs, I also work at our company which gives me very little time left in the day to do much. If we need to cook for an event, for example, I just give money to buy the food from a caterer, which is much easier. But I need to learn that I have to devote more of what is valuable for me, my time, for ethical self-discipline. In the end nothing is mine, neither my money nor my time. Even my children and my husband are not mine, they all belong to Allah and that is how we must treat them. We cannot *own* our families or our money and time and we must be ready to give them away when it is necessary."

Pınar conveys here that the only time she feels like she is sacrificing something of herself is when she is giving something that she normally would not be willing to part with. For some people this may be money, but for her it is her time. She inculcates herself by acknowledging that time is not her property and neither is her family (the ones she sees as being deserving of her time). Her ethical reasoning leads her to separate the categories in her life that apparently seem linked to each other (family, time, family-hours), so she can devote all those categories to volunteering. Her statement reminded of a similar principle that was expressed to me by an interlocutor some years previously, "for giving to be considered sacred, it needs to hurt you". Hurt here does not refer to physical pain but rather means that what you give needs to be previous enough for you to create an affect. Giving needs to affect you enough to change you, move you from the person you are now and create an emotional shift towards selflessness.

When I asked Pınar if she bore any expectations from her volunteering her answer was that she did not, which is when I asked her how it was possible that she did not even have any spiritual expectations:

> "It all comes down to your perception of things. If you think you are the owner of your belongings, then yes you will have some kind of material expectation. But we are not owners, even of our own lives. All I want is God's consent that he knows I love him and have faith. I do not think about heaven or punishment when I do things and what will happen to me in the afterlife. All I want is to train myself to do my good deeds with the purest intentions and to receive God's acknowledgment, open my heart to him. I do not want anything more."

[11] Pınar is one of my informants that I became acquainted with later on in my fieldwork. She is a mother of three boys and works for her husband's company, which is based in Brussels. She was introduced to Hizmet through her husband and has actively volunteered for over 10 years.

We were having tea one evening in the association with Elif and a group of other volunteers. By that time, 7 months had passed since the *kermes* and I had already written about Tuba's devotion to learning new things in the kitchen when it came to *hizmet*. I do not remember exactly how it came up, but Elif was talking about a group of young women who were making *baklava* to raise money. She started describing both her surprise and her approval of these young women and said (addressing me),

> "They are like you, young and always look well maintained. They dress very nicely and even put on their bits and pieces of jewelry, then they come here, put on their aprons and make *baklava*. I am amazed, you should see it".

Baklava is a traditional Turkish dessert which is very complicated to make. It consists of forty layers of handmade pastry which is made into extremely thin sheets, all placed on top of each other with a filling and finally covered with syrup after it is cooked. Making the sheets of pastry and cooking it at the right temperature and speed is said to be extremely difficult. In short, *baklava* is a dessert which one's very traditional and skilled Turkish grandmother makes, not a thing for an ordinary college student. So for a group of young girls who are like me, "young and always look well maintained" (the sort of adjectives probably not used to describe a traditional Turkish grandmother) was quite fascinating. I asked Elif how they came not only to learn the skill but also to produce the dessert in large quantities. "It is thanks to *Hizmet*", she told me with a huge smile;

> "The women themselves told me that if it were not for *Hizmet* they would never ever have entered into such a job. They needed a way to raise money and decided that *baklava* would be the one dessert that would attract a lot of attention".

I remarked that this could probably be conceptualized as 'self-development for God's sake', and funnily enough, all the other women there that day agreed.

Contributing to a *kermes* is not restricted just to the women who have organized the event. The women and men who come to buy from the *kermes* also feel the ethical burden to contribute, not through production but consumption in this case. I noticed that the people who came to visit the *kermes* were also people who had sympathies with the Movement. These men and women brought their neighbors, colleagues, family and friends to the event so that it could reach a bigger crowd. The event was announced within the Movement's own network, which still remained slightly limited so the people that came to buy and consume made sure that they brought along at least one extra person with them. If the organizers had the duty of preparing for the *kermes*, the participants had the duty of making sure that it was a success. They also made sure that they had at least one course of their daily meals in the association, or if they had guests, that they would supply their catering for the association. Put more concisely, the participants, who returned nearly every day, made sure they organized their day so that one way or another they could be present in the *kermes* and contribute thereto. It is safe to say that there was a chain, a cycle. There are those members of the association who cook and put together a *kermes*, and there are other people of the Movement who are not necessarily members of the association but who contribute by visiting the event and by buying the goods.

It has been argued that religious conviction is expressed by the actor through "concrete acts of religious observance" (Winchester 2008: 1754). I agree with this argument and have a point to add. That is, enacted religious behavior is an indication of a moral self, however the behavior need not necessarily be 'religious' in the sense that it is a ritual (praying, fasting and so on). Geertz made a distinction between religious and non-religious conducts by stating that religious conducts are usually those that affirm the "nature of reality" (Geertz 1973). Based on this argument, a practice need not be a ritual in as much as it needs to affirm a phenomenon as religious for it to be religious. Hence, my interlocutor's conducts were not part of a prototypical Islamic ritual, but the moral discourse that was embedded in their language was embodied in their practice. Concepts such as service, motion, action, learning and progress only mean something to these women if they refer to *rıza-i ilahi* ('God's sake'), *hayır* ('prosperity') and *bereket* ('blessing'). Whilst the practice itself, such as baking cakes or making *baklava* or even wearing yourself out by working day and night, may supposedly be mundane, the intention underlying it and the discourse surrounding it is predominantly moral. Hirschkind, who carried out extensive work on pious self-fashioning and cassette sermons, has noted that Islamic religious discourse preached through cassette-sermons creates the image of possibility for a world embodying that discourse. The cassette-sermons, he argued, constitute "an exercise of ethical self-discipline" (Hirschkind 2001: 624). Gülen's sermons similarly create an image of a world in which a person can be actively pious by just being active in itself. Tuba's explanation of how she consciously put effort into learning new things, because 'someone had to do it', is also an example of her not seeing it only as part of her personal progress but also as an investment in her personal morality because what she is doing is important ethically. Her small contribution aims to open a gate to communication with the larger society, the neighborhood, which, according to her, will lead to greater good. This practice, which is ethically embedded, is also an indication of how she invests in her personal morality. This moral understanding comes from the idea of committing to a greater meaning. Mahmood has defined piety as "being close to God: a manner of being and acting that suffuses all of one's acts, both religious and worldly in character" (Mahmood 2001:830). According to Mahmood, piety is something which is always in progress, and which requires work and effort to build further. Hence with my interlocutors it is apparent that they saw this kind of participation in events such as the *kermes* as not only an act of charity and fund raising but, like piety, it is a commitment in every aspect of life to a greater meaning. In many studies, anthropologists refer to religious practices as main constituents of the moral self (Mahmood 2005; Hirschkind 2001), but in my ethnography I have found that even the mundane conduct can be a method of moral construction, if the person doing it bears the consciousness of investing time and effort for God's disposition.

Cycle of spirituality; 'the Gift' in Giving to God

The cycle of giving and taking, investing time and labor to produce and investing time and money to consume, is in fact a cycle of moral deeds. While volunteers are giving, they are giving more than just money or material goods; they are making sure that they are giving something personal, such as their talents, their efforts and a lot of their time. In

a way, these are more valuable goods to give because it requires a lot more investment. But then why is it important that what they give be so valuable? I have already argued how everyday mundane practice is ethically embedded by the intentions that are ascribed thereto, which is reflected in the moral terminology. In this section, focus on how volunteering takes the form of a moral commitment that comprise an ultimate gift transaction with God. I question the economical and social dimension of gift theory and discuss other motivations in giving. By taking the Islamic tradition of giving and its practice among the Hizmet volunteers in perspective, we can understand how a simple voluntary activity, such as a *kermes*, can become a means of moral self-development.

Mauss, in his work on the concept of the gift, has explained that there is no gift that is devoid of a larger meaning (1990 [1950]). He suggested that gifts are part of the social, economic and/or moral structures of society, connected to honor and wealth, or are just a part of warding off evil and bad luck (1990 [1950]). Drawing on his work, Mary Douglas argued that there is no such thing as a 'free gift': "gift cycles engage persons in permanent commitments that articulate the dominant institutions" (1990 [1950]). Literature based on the concept of the gift generally focuses upon how gift exchange creates reciprocal relationships and, hence, comes with expectations (Gregory 1980; Laidlaw 2000; Derrida 1992). The case with volunteering for the *kermes* is a very complicated and intricate act of giving that involves different types of intention and behavior. Whereas the surface intention of giving is based on raising money to maintain the association that will in turn provide a space to carry out events to solve social problems, the deeper intention is to work for something with a pure intention that will, in the end, hopefully gain God's approval. The first intention carries a specific expectation of reciprocity, maybe not in the material way, but certainly an expectation that concerns positive outcomes in society (if not immediately then eventually). These social outcomes can range across a very wide spectrum from providing a solution to a problem by initiating social dialogue. The second point entails a deeper intention that cannot be summed up by saying that our interlocutors had a 'divine expectation'. So what did my interlocutors expect in relation to all that they had given? As I have explained in the previous section, when they were asked why they invested so much of themselves in volunteering, the women tended to answer "*Hizmet*"; it is for *Hizmet* they said. For them, *Hizmet* is the fundamental motivational drive that pushes them to give and then to give more.

In the introduction I formulated my interlocutors' volunteering practices as collectivist, based upon Eckstein's definition. It is appreciated that in this type of volunteering, incentives of duty, responsibility and common good etc. are very high (Hustinx and Lammertyn 2003). Accordingly, *Hizmet* is a representation of such incentives.[12] It provides them a context, in which these values are sought in society.

[12] Eckstein contends that in collective volunteering there is usually class or community homegeneity. Although we cannot speak of a class homogeneity among my interlocutors, we can definitely observe a sense of homogeniety in how they define themselves as part of a religious social movement (Hizmet), and a common religious discourse. Eckstein adds that in these types of structures there is high commitment to the group identity and goals, where the common goals surpass individual aspirations (Eckstein 2001). "Social involvement acquires a very specific symbolic meaning", in which it becomes a way of reaffirming the group identity (Hustinx and Lammertyn 2003:175). Consequently, *Hizmet* embeds common goals of responsibility and duty (doing something good for society) and becomes a shared identity for my interlocutors. They share this identity and acquire the moral reasoning for this from their religious discourse.

This kind of 'giving to the society' is highly regarded among my interlocutors, but *Hizmet* is really a means to an end, which involves gaining God's approval and salvation. They give through society to God. When Elif sees *Hizmet* as the motivation for women to work hard and contributes to an act of *hassanah* ('good deed'), the ultimate motivation is their belief in God. Referring to why the Hizmet volunteer is motivated to "work" harder, I believe it has a close connection to the meaning attributed to giving something personal. Volunteering in the form of investing time, effort, labor and skill entails different implications than that of giving "objects". From this point of view, I feel it necessary to question Mauss's conceptualization of the gift and the established categories through which we analyze gift exchange.

Marilyn Strathern expands upon Mauss's theory of gift exchange and challenges Western analytical categories when interpreting non-Western cultures. She claims that while in the West the individual is the central agent of social relations, in other cultures this may not be the case (Strathern 1988). In her field site in Melanesia she observes that society is the center of individual action, as the individual is socially embedded (Strathern 1988). Taking up gift exchange from this analytical point of view sheds a different light on the phenomenon. Strathern criticizes the assumption of the gift exchange as a commodity exchange. In the exchange of objects (commodities), as Marilyn Strathern suggests, every object that is exchanged has a determined value that is exchanged in the return of an object of that value, in return this type of cycle becomes a "commodity exchange" (Godelier in Strathern 1988: 136). Strathern goes on to explain that in her fieldwork she saw that gifts were more than commodities in the Western sense. She contends that gifts also had an "essential value" that was determined by the human labor that was put into it and the general social value the gift beheld (Strathern 1988: 136). The two important elements of labor and social value made it nearly impossible to assess the essential value of the gift, in contrast to commodity exchange, where the object is always exchanged with an object of equivalent value. Strathern unpacks the tradition of gift exchange, not as a mere cycle of objects but as a profound establishment of relationship between those who exchange them because of the personal effort of labor put into them (Strathern 1988:143).[13]

I believe that Mauss and Strathern's conceptualizations, although very valuable, can be questioned. Both Mauss and Strathern put forward interesting social and economic analysis; however, I suggest that we need to think beyond categories that deal with the social and the individual and its reflections on the economic system. We need to inquire into deeper reasons that motivate giving. While both Mauss and Strathern agree that, as a socially embedded being, the individual puts more effort into the gift according to the social value of the transaction. Departing from their argument, I suggest that in the case of my interlocutors, since my interlocutors' gift exchange is with God their input in the gift is what determines the commitment to God. Since they strongly believe that the level of their commitment to God is directly related to their ethical self, I argue that gift exchange cannot be limited to merely an economic or social transaction but should also be regarded as personal commitment to developing the ethical self.

When talking about giving as an ethical duty, which has a very prominent place in my interlocutors' everyday discourse, they refer to the word *infaq*. *Infaq*, which is

[13] Strathern asserts that the flow of objects symbolize the flow of people; indivduals give themselves through objects.

Arabic for ‘spending’, refers to giving in the name of charity (Khaf 2007). Whereas in many cases *Infaq* is used as an economic term, in which giving includes the giving of material substance or money (Khaf 2007; Ekin 2002), in this current case *infaq* is the giving of time, effort and skill. For the act of giving to be accepted by God, it is strongly emphasized that the giver should expect nothing back. The theological idea behind *infaq* and giving in the name of God is that humans are not the ultimate owners of anything in this world to begin with (Ekin 2002). Remembering the explanation of Pinar, who reaffirms this principle, and who tries to reflect on it in her life, they are not the owners of their wealth, their properties, their families or even their bodies. Whatever they seem to possess, they possess it because God blessed them with it in the first place; a fully functioning body, children, money and success are all blessings of God and part of his divine order (Ekin 2002).

Giving is actually sharing what God gave to a person to share in the first place.[14] What are being shared are not the personal belongings of the person himself or herself, because even the aforementioned time, skill and effort do not belong to the person, they are the blessings of God. Hence the ‘giving’ is the giving of God’s belongings, which is why the individual cannot expect anything back. However, by acknowledging their duty as believers and fulfilling their duty of *infaq*, believers may expect a reward in the afterlife (Khaf 2007). This expectation, however, is mixed with the feeling of hope because although God sends his message that those who give will be rewarded, the level of selflessness and the purity of the intention are all determinants of how much this will prevail.

The Hizmet volunteers link this kind of giving to Gülen’s Sufi interpretation of *himmah* (‘aspiration’). *Himmah* literally means effort, concentration and desire (Latief 2012). In the Sufi context, *himmah* means to turn to and desire God and involves disembedding oneself from all worldly attachments (Gülen 2005). *Himmah* is guided by the believer’s love for God and entails “The power that motivates the servant to obtain the desired goal, whereby his seeking [is] tainted by neither the hope of reward nor the fear of chastisement”[15] (Kāshānī 1993: 379). This phenomenon is also related to the concept of *iltizam* (commitment), in the sense that Lara Deeb refers to it as being the individual’s complicated relationship with God that entails them to be constantly working as “an agent of God” in the world but also in a state of emotional submission and faith towards him (Deeb 2006: 34).

It is understood that the believer only acts on his/her desire for God’s love and closeness. It can clearly be understood here that, referring to the Sufi tradition, any act which is done to reach God should be done with the perseverance of reaching God somewhat spiritually, rather than with the expectation of reward or fear of punishment. In this sense, the concept of giving includes a different dimension from that which Mauss argued when he put forward the notion that giving is never a neutral act, and that it creates a social expectation. In my interlocutors’ case, what was given was not material but more personal aspects of their skill, time and labor, and the aim was not fulfilling social expectation but divine expectation. They cannot expect any spiritual

[14] Lara Deeb mentions similarly that, according to her female interlocutors in al-Dahiyya, the “value of piety” is determined by the correct practice of Islam. This entails that one sacrifice their time, labor and money to help those in need.

[15] See also Özgüç, Orhan (2008), 'Islamic Himmah and Christian Charity: An Attempt at Inter-Faith Dialogue."' *Conference Proceedings of Islam in the Age of Global Challenges: Alternative Perspectives of the Gülen Movement,* Georgetown University, Washington DC.

return from what they gave because what was given ultimately belongs to God and was handed over to them as a blessing to be distributed. It is their loyalty to and love of God that guided them to distribute those blessings, and if they should receive anything in the afterlife it is very much related to the purity of their intentions as believers when they carried out the *hassanah*. But it is not the duty of believers to calculate their *hassanah* or to try to decipher intentions; their role is to establish a strong bond with God and to love God without conditions. When it comes to how valuable a *hassanah* will be in the afterlife, 'Allahu alem', God knows the truth the best.

Conclusion

This research was carried out in the context of a *kermes* (a charity sale) in the Golden Rose, a women's association based in Brussels. The majority of the interlocutors are observant Muslims who were volunteers at the association, and invested some days each week in the projects, which they developed and carried out together. The aim of the study was to understand how a particular, apparently mundane, practice such as a charity sale is transformed into a morally embedded practice and in turn how this is a form of ethical self-formation.

Participating in the preparation process for the *kermes* and in the actual event, I noticed above all that the women's perception of the event was morally embedded. I noticed this through their general discourse about the *kermes*; the terminology they used to respond to particular incidents or phenomena sprang directly from a religious context. For me, this meant that this charitable activity was not just an event that came out of the goodness of their hearts solely because they wanted to raise money for a cause. This charity for them actually served a higher purpose, where goodness is intersubjectively linked to God. They invested their time and efforts in this event because they believed that the more they give of themselves, the more they will develop their personal piety. This perception of giving is related to a larger Islamic concept of *infaq*, which designates that believers have to give money, material or something of themselves to reach God. My interlocutors, the Hizmet volunteers, reflect on this tradition of *infaq* in their daily lives as a means of 'doing something for God'. *Infaq* in this sense is a commitment to giving that is to be embraced and never to be deserted. But this act of giving differs from Mauss and Strathern's conceptualization of the gift, in which giving is socially embedded. They categorically look at giving as either a commodity exchange or gift exchange. Gift giving in their instance is a social requirement, in which the cycle of giving is a continuation of social relationships. Thus giving is a product of a particular kind of social expectation and generates reciprocation in the process.

I question these categories and add that, beyond the social dimension, giving can also have a spiritual dimension where the gift is meant for God. The more devoted the believer is to giving, the more s/he will ethically progress. A believer cannot expect anything material in return if giving is related to *infaq*, which is done to please God alone. In this case, the investment is for the afterlife, although in this case giving does not really mean counting points to determine whether or not one will go to heaven in the end.

Giving for God is meant to establish a bond of love between the believer and God. The believer needs to give with only the desire of gaining God's approval, and the Sufis describe this as *himmah*, perseverance in finding God. Having engaged in the religious sources, in which such terms are taken up frequently, my interlocutors aspire to live in such an ethical manner. They believe that being in expectation of reward or punishment will hinder a person's bond with God, so humans cannot really be sure whether their good deeds will, in the end, lead to their salvation. It is not the believer's place to know or predict this, it is only God's. Ultimately, the act of giving is not really insurance for whether the giver will gain salvation, and it is not meant to be. What is important is the process of investing more and more of what one has, whether that may be money, intellect, time or any other asset, because all of what is given is a distribution of God's blessings sent to the world. Giving is a practice that keeps the person in the consciousness of staying in contact with God. The practice entails creating a bond between one's heart and God, returning to the original Turkish concept of the volunteer; *gönüllü*, someone who acts, who gives on the premises of the deepest part of the heart.

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