

Economic Theologies of Abundance: Halal Exchange and the Limits of Neoliberal Effects in Post-war Bosnia–Herzegovina

David Henig 

University of Kent, Canterbury, UK


ABSTRACT

This paper questions claims about the all-pervasive neoliberalization of everyday life that dominate many debates in anthropology and beyond. Situated in deprived rural areas of post-war Bosnia–Herzegovina where socio-economic restructuring has led to a reduction in social redistribution and access to many once-guaranteed state provisions, I explore the workings of an Islamic economic theology of halal exchange that mediates divine abundance through an ethics of care and generosity. In a situation of increasing socio-economic inequalities, the economic theology of halal exchange offers villagers a parallel logic of relating to the divine and to each other, as it is concerned with generosity and sharing rather than with the calculative logic of profit and accumulation. Ultimately, this paper addresses the way that specific reconfigurations of cultural values provide a significant basis for moral imagination, innovative practice and virtuous action at a time of radical change and uncertainty.

KEYWORDS Bosnia-Herzegovina; economic theology; exchange; Islam; value

In the summer of 2013, I received a Facebook message from a Bosnian friend, Edib. The message was short, saying ‘this can happen only in Bosnia-Herzegovina’, followed by a URL link. In the message, Edib sent me an article that was being widely circulated at the time on social media in Bosnia–Herzegovina, about the greengrocer Jusuf Solo. The article was entitled *Halal to you! Whoever has no money to pay, will get it for free*. It describes how the greengrocer Jusuf gives *halal* – that is, for free – any fruits or vegetables from his stall. The greengrocer gives away produce for free to anyone, as he explains in the article, ‘who can’t earn, and who doesn’t have any income’. He adds,

I was asked why I give food away for free [...] people come to my stall, staring, and can’t believe it. But there is nothing miraculous in what I am doing: everyone who gives for free, will receive back a thousand times more from Allah. Only Allah knows best.

CONTACT David Henig  d.henig@kent.ac.uk, d.henig@uu.nl

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

When he was 17, Jusuf left for Russia where he worked and earned enough money. ‘Thanks to Allah, and the help of good people’, he muses, ‘I made it, I earned enough, and I have a good life. It is now my turn to help’.

Stories about people giving away food for free, or giving small donations to people who need medical treatment, frequently circulate in the public sphere in Bosnia–Herzegovina today (Brković 2016). These stories mirror prolonged economic predicaments, shrinking social redistribution and the grassroots solidarity of ‘empty bellies’ (Hromadžić 2015) that have been unfolding in the country since the end of the war in 1995. The post-war economic decline led to large-scale deindustrialisation and the ensuing unemployment of entire labour sectors, and gave rise to unprecedented socio-economic inequalities (Kurtović 2015). The forms of giving and caring the ‘halal way’ captured in the greengrocer’s story, which my friend Edib shared with me, therefore, need to be understood within this spatio-temporal configuration of a polity that is undergoing pervasive socio-economic restructuring following the violent disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia (Jansen 2015).

For the greengrocer Jusuf, as well as for Edib and other Bosnians I met during my years of fieldwork, the act of ‘halal giving’ to those who struggle to access even basic provisions is an expression of a critical social commentary on the current political situation and economic deprivation. Simultaneously, however, for the greengrocer Jusuf and for my friend Edib who regularly care and give ‘the halal way’, the postsocialist, post-war Bosnian state, which does not give or care for its citizens, is perceived not only as corrupt and dysfunctional but also as being *haram*, that is, immoral and polluted (Henig 2016a). Indeed, during my research, I quickly became accustomed to the frequent attribution of ‘halal’ to a myriad of acts, practices, events and things in the flow of life, including acts of care for oneself and others. ‘Halal’, I was often told on such occasions, ‘is everything that satisfies Allah’. Such framing stems from the conception whereby to act or give the halal way is an act of value creation that is commensurable with respect for the historically formed conceptions of what I describe in this paper as ‘halal metavalues’.¹ In turn, ‘halal metavalues’ is incommensurable with other metavalues, in this case ‘haram’ ones (Lambek 2015a: 228).²

What can we take from the greengrocer’s story of giving the halal way? What do the acts of halal giving tell us about the force and forms of moral imagination, creativity and resistance that unfold in the current context of global inequalities, and when the entwinements of cultural values and the calculative logic of the market brought by economic restructuring are being profoundly reconfigured? In recent years, there has been a tendency among a wide range of scholars to attend to such reconfigurations under the banner of neoliberalism in its many variants (Ortner 2016: 51–58). Although this body of scholarship produced some splendid interventions into the unfolding global and local transformations of economic restructuring and moralities, and their socio-political consequences (e.g. Han 2012; Muehlebach 2012), it also often overdetermined the neoliberal effects in the analysis, and flattened or singled out ‘other possible moral/economic settlements that we already know are out there in the ethical ecosystem [...] [and thus preventing us] from taking alternative values seriously’ (Mair et al. 2015: 917).

In this paper, I consider the arguments about neoliberal restructuring, calculative logic and the market as being *not* ‘the only games in town’ (Maurer 2001: 11; cited in Mittermaier 2013: 276).³ I track how these processes are entwined with ‘halal meta-value’ that enables transvaluation across divergent value domains, and specifically with Muslim moral imagination and acts of halal exchange in different moments of social life in post-war Bosnia–Herzegovina. By influencing each other, this entwinement gives rise to a specific configuration of an economic theology of halal exchange. The concept of economic theology follows Marcel Mauss’ discussion of those forms of gift exchange whereby ‘the thing given produces its rewards in this life and in the next’ (Mauss 2016: 162). In the case of Bosnia–Herzegovina, such an economic theology of halal exchange unfolds within a wider field of cultural conceptions and idioms that living a Muslim life consists of an ongoing exchange of blessing, prosperity and fortune, for good deeds, merits and prayers between the living, the dead and the Almighty, that is, from a perpetual flow or ‘vital exchange’ of divine grace and abundance (Henig n.d.; also Bringa 1995; Hart 2013). Indeed, the greengrocer Jusuf was lucky, thanks to Allah’s help, and the generous people in Russia who helped him, so he can now give back. At this point, Jusuf’s story of success and generosity enters the field of personal luck, and fortune that he subsequently redistributes as divine abundance (*bereket*) to anyone ‘who can’t earn, and who doesn’t have any income’, and which in turn earns good deeds (*sevap*) for Jusuf’s personal eschatology.

An economic theology of halal exchange as I conceive it embraces several fields of moral-cum-economic activity that have concerned anthropological theory for some time, such as gift exchange, generosity, luck of obtainment or a lack of thereof, and in particular abundance.

In examining these themes through the lenses of an economic theology of halal exchange, I follow Amira Mittermaier’s (2013: 275–276) recent attempt to bring together ‘this-worldly parameters’, ‘divine abundance’ (*baraka*) and ‘the afterlife’ in order to unsettle claims about an all-pervasive neoliberalization of everyday life. Situated in the Zvijezda highlands, Central Bosnia, where I have been conducting fieldwork over the last decade, this paper tracks the instances of ‘halal exchange’ that enable transvaluation across divergent value domains in order to contribute to the debates that attempt to rethink the meanings and boundaries of economy, the market and overdetermined forces of neoliberal effects through the lenses of economic theologies.

Economic Theologies of Abundance and Halal Exchange

Imagine if Marcel Mauss had used the Islamic concept of *halal* to inform his theory of exchange and his thoughts on the development of social justice in human history. This thought experiment is not as speculative as it might seem. Although in *The Gift*, Mauss draws upon a wide range of legal concepts and traditions, his engagement with Islamic tradition takes place chiefly through his discussion of alms (Guyer 2016: 13).⁴ In the concluding chapter of *The Gift*, Mauss directly engages with Islamic economic theologies (Dresch 1998). After his critique of *Homo economicus*, self-interest and ‘[t]he brutal

pursuit of individual goals' (2016: 191), Mauss turns to the Quranic surah 64 on the Last Judgement, invoking the Islamic conception of *sadaqa* (alms giving). Mauss uses *sadaqa* as an example of a human economy that has at its heart common interest and justice rather than individual interest, injustice and inequality.⁵ The concept thus energised his critique of the orthodoxies of modern economic systems operating under the logic of self-interest and calculation, and it fundamentally influenced his vision of a new economy organised along the moral principles of generosity, mutuality and cooperation (Maurer 2005: 93). Following in Mauss' footsteps, I suggest that an engagement with the ways in which charitable giving works in different situations of social life today offers a vantage point for unsettling the current economic orthodoxies of neoliberalism and the market (Mittermaier 2013; Osella and Rudnyckyj 2017).

The act of giving alms is distinguished in Islam between obligatory alms, or *zakat*, which is the third of the five pillars of Islam, and *sadaqa*, an act of charitable giving or beneficence (Singer 2008: 20). Alms-giving is rooted in the conviction that one's wealth and fortune should be shared with anyone in need. All wealth is ultimately generated by and belongs to God, and should, therefore, be shared as evenly as possible rather than accumulated in order to ensure that justice in the world here and now is achieved, and one's account settled in preparation for the afterlife. The act of alms-giving thus 'purifies' one's wealth and makes the remaining portion pure, lawful, that is, *halal* (Benthall 1999: 29; Singer 2008: 36–37). Marcel Mauss was well aware of the practices of charitable giving (*sadaqa*) and the importance attributed to social justice and solidarity articulated in acts of care, generosity and redistribution. In the forest of footnotes accompanying *The Gift*, Mauss suggests at one point that instead of using the ethnographic material from Melanesia to develop his ethnographic theory of the gift, he 'could just as well as choose the Arabic *sadaqa*: alms, bridewealth, justice, tax' (2016: 186 n. 24; italics in the original). Elsewhere in the footnotes, Mauss refers to 'a magical value still present in *sadaqa*' (2016: 82, footnote 3; italics in the original). *Sadaqa* is thus a story of the Maussian Gift that has yet to be written.

Islamic charitable practices, however, as Atia (2013: xix) reminds us, 'are not a priori alternatives to a Western social/economic order; they are fluid, variable practices situated in specific places and times'. In her work on Islamic charities in Egypt, Atia, for example, explores a convergence of capitalist and religious subjectivity that gives rise to what she calls 'pious neoliberalism'. Similarly, Rudnyckyj (2010) in his pioneering work on 'spiritual economies' showed how spiritual reformers in an Indonesia steel plant (and elsewhere in Southeast Asia) enhanced pious subjectivity of the workers by creating training programmes to make the capitalist values of entrepreneurialism and business success compatible with Islamic teaching and practice. What dominates these accounts is a particular form of economic theology of neoliberal piety that Amira Mittermaier (2013, 2014) calls 'trading with God'. This is a form of individual conduct and cultivation of pious neoliberal subjectivity based on self-regulation and entrepreneurialism, and any action in the world here and now, including charitable activities, is driven primarily by the calculative logic of doing the good deeds that improves one's relationship with God in the afterlife (Atia 2013). However, I concur with Mittermaier that situating 'pious neoliberalism' and Islamic charity solely as a neoliberal effect, 'fails to capture the complex

religious ethics and divine economies at work' (2013: 275). This does not mean ignoring these effects but rather paying attention also to 'erasures and displacements [...], intersections, interplays, frictions, and disjunctures' (Atia 2013). In the Zvijezda highlands, as I illustrate in this paper, economic theology of halal exchange dwells at the margins of the neoliberal effects but it does not mean that village life in the highlands would be void of the impact of post-war neoliberal restructuring (Henig 2016b). Moreover, there has not been any significant emergence of entrepreneurial faith-based charitable organisations in the villages (the situation is different in urban areas) that would embrace and promote the forms of pious neoliberalism that Atia and others write about.⁶ Instead, the charitable modes of giving and caring that I discuss here gesture towards a parallel and coexisting economic theology, which is, as Mittermaier suggests, 'mindful of divine abundance and the limits of calculation' and which 'promotes an ethos of generosity, one that partakes in an economy of *baraka*, of blessing, abundance, and overflow' (2013: 275–276, 287). Whereas recent scholarship has paid attention to economic theologies of trading with God, the instances of economic theologies of divine abundance and their entwinements with the neoliberal effects and how 'divine abundance' (*baraka*) is mediated in everyday life remain under-examined.⁷

Both the acts of charitable giving discussed by Mittermaier and what I call in this paper 'halal exchange' belong to each other and act as moral vectors pointing in the same direction, that is, towards mediating divine abundance in the world here and now. Someone may ask in what way should giving sadaqa and halal exchange be treated as separate. For villagers in the Zvijezda highlands sadaqa is specifically associated with alms giving during the holy month of Ramadan and is rarely invoked during any other occasion. In turn, any act of sadaqa is a halal act, but not every act of halal exchange is considered to be sadaqa, such as forgiving debts or not charging one's neighbour for more money than she is able to give.

Halal exchange is a moral vector of action that orients villagers towards re-production of values in regard to halal-metavalue. Ultimately then, an economic theology of halal exchange unfolds in the villagers' acts not as a rule of conduct but as a matter of ethical judgments, depending on the context and circumstances.⁸ Pursuing social relations and exchanges the halal way is for my village friends and interlocutors a way of making sense of one's life in the contemporary moment, dominated as it is by a pervasive neoliberal ethos and its impoverishing effects. Yet, as I show alongside other authors (Mittermaier 2013, 2014; Schielke 2015), halal exchange is a reminder that there are 'grand schemes' and 'other games in town' that enable villagers to shape their lives in parallel with such dominant frameworks of calculation and excess, and that value of sharing and generosity with fellow humans acts as a way of mediating divine abundance instead.

Sacrifice as Halal Exchange

If 'halal is everything that satisfies Allah', as I was often told during my fieldwork in the Zvijezda highlands, how is the conception of 'halal' as metavalue 'against which everything else is relative and to be measured' (Lambek 2015a: 227) established? According to Lambek (2015a: 237, 2015b), blood sacrifice often lies at the root of value, and serves as

an act of metavalue. In turn, the coexistence of regimes of value requires ‘the work of ritualisation’ (Keane 2001) and ‘cosmological authentication’ (Weiner 1992) to establish hierarchies and maintain the boundaries between them. Ritualised blood sacrifice is rather a common feature across many traditions (Bloch 1992). Here I am concerned with the Abrahamic religious traditions, and with the Islamic tradition in particular. Although there is considerable performative variability in Islamic ritual practice of the feast of sacrifice (Bowen 1992; Delaney 1991), the act of blood sacrifice brings divine abundance and grace, and is followed by generous redistribution of the sacrificed meat. Participating in the ritual is an expression of one’s piety, social standing and ethics of care for others.

My first encounter with an act of halal exchange in the Zvijezda highlands was in the early days of my fieldwork during the Islamic feast of sacrifice, recognised locally as *kurban bajram*. In the villages where I was conducting fieldwork, *kurban bajram* is a four-day feast at which a ram is sacrificed on the first day. The sacrificed meat (*kurban*) should then be divided into three parts. One third is given to the poor who cannot afford to sacrifice an animal (this is often done by donating the meat to the local soup kitchen), one third is given to neighbours within one’s neighbourhood, and finally one third is consumed by the household and kin. This redistributive logic ensures that divine abundance, bestowed in the sacrifice, circulates within these networks.

During my fieldwork, the feast was already on everyone’s lips several weeks before it actually took place. Everyone I talked to wanted to participate in the feast. However, over coffee in the privacy of their houses, many of my friends and interlocutors often expressed doubts as to whether they would actually be able to afford to sacrifice a ram. My friends, including Edib whom I introduced earlier, put these current anxieties and predicaments about the (im)possibility of their sacrificing in sharp contrast with the pre-war times when everyone in the villages was able and did perform the sacrifice. Deciding whom one ought to give sacrificed meat to is another step in the preparation for the act of sacrifice. Unlike in Muslim societies with hierarchical social fabric and strong vertical relationships where the feast takes the form of redistribution between socially unequal persons (Werbner 1990), in the Zvijezda highlands, the *kurban bajram* is recognised as a feast of the neighbourhood, and thus every household in one’s neighbourhood is visited and given the sacrifice. This means that the feast carries a persuasive moral narrative of mutuality and equality, and the circulation of the sacrificed meat weaves non-hierarchical horizontal relations between persons living in physical proximity. Yet as I have pointed out, despite the circulation of such discursive depictions of loyal and caring neighbours among the villagers, it has become less common for *all* households to participate in the sacrifice and its subsequent redistribution. The line between those households who can and who cannot perform the sacrifice mirrors new economic hierarchies that have emerged between individual households as a result of the post-war socio-economic restructuring in the country (Henig 2012, 2016b). Does this development mean that neighbourhood solidarity and valuing non-hierarchical horizontal relations would vanish? To answer to this question, let me turn the village I call Brdo.

In the past decade, the number of households in the village who could afford to sacrifice a ram decreased by around one third.⁹ Whereas in the pre-war Yugoslav times animal sacrifice was practiced in all households, nowadays only well-off families, and those households who retreated to subsistence farming¹⁰ can afford to perform the sacrifice. Put differently, all households in the village that have means to sacrifice continue to redistribute sacrificed meat, including giving to those who cannot afford it anymore. So whereas the pre-war *kurban bajram* feast was deemed to be an ‘actually existing horizontality’ of balanced reciprocal giving, post-war socio-economic development, and massive indebtedness of many households have brought about a shift in circulation of the sacrifice towards ‘actually existing verticality’ as the giving of blessed meat gained a redistributive character for those still well-off villagers. To address the question of how this transformation reconfigures neighbourhood solidarity and the value of horizontal relations, I return to ‘halal metavalue’. The widening gap between individual households caused by increasing socio-economic inequalities that manifests itself in the decreasing ability of villagers to take part in the sacrifice, I suggest, is bridged by the work of ritualisation that maintains the value of ‘horizontal social relations’ unsullied, and thus incommensurable with the rising socio-economic inequalities. It is the way the sacrifice is given, the ‘halal way’, that establishes and ‘cosmologically authenticates’ (Weiner 1992) halal metavalue against which any other exchanges between villagers can be measured and made commensurable.¹¹

While writing about the feast of sacrifice, anthropologists of Islam have primarily paid attention to the very act of sacrifice, its public discourses and how the scriptural orthodoxies and local practices of the feast intersect or differ (Bowen 1992; Brisebarre 1993). What has been left largely unexplored is the rhythm of the entire sacrifice complex of which the act of sacrifice is part. Furthermore, what actually happens after the act of sacrifice, during the moments of giving sacrificed meat (*kurban*)? The way *kurban* is exchanged is the case in point here as not only meat circulates at that time. An act of giving during the feast is a performative act that also entails an exchange of words. Indeed, it is words, rather than the objects of exchange (sacrificed meat in this case), that specify, as Webb Keane argues, ‘what kind of action is being performed, from whom the prestations come, to whom they are directed, and what kind of act they perform’ (2001: 74). In turn, the performative act of giving the sacrifice is an act whereby ‘halal metavalue’ is established, and against which any act of exchange is measured as ‘halal exchange’, that is, an instance of divine abundance, such as the example of the greengrocer Jusuf, who gives away for free (*halal*) any fruit and vegetables from his stall to anyone in need, illustrates.

The act of giving the sacrifice has a highly elaborated etiquette of performative utterances (Lambek 2015b). Although I draw here on the case study from the village Brdo, I have observed the very same etiquette in other villages as well as in municipal towns in the Zvijezda highlands. A person giving sacrificed meat always brings it to the doorstep of the house of the receiver. The receiver of the sacrifice says *kabulosum*, meaning in this context ‘I agree to accept this’, at the very moment of receiving. The giver then utters *halalosome*, meaning in this context ‘you don’t owe me anything’. To ensure the performative act of ‘halal giving’ is not sullied, the receiver, should she happen to have

sacrificed meat to reciprocate, never gives back immediately. Giving *kurban* the halal way requires bringing the sacrifice to the house of the original giver. An overall choreography of giving the sacrificed meat performatively and temporarily disables immediate reciprocity of direct equivalence (Dresch 1998: 125), thus establishing incommensurability of ‘halal metavalue’.

Giving sacrificed meat is a performative act of *halal* giving, during which not only sacrificed meat is exchanged but also words. The word uttered while receiving the sacrifice, *kabulosum*, derives from Arabic *makbul*, meaning ‘accepted from God’. In turn, *halalosum*, is a compound word, composed from *halal* and *olsun*, meaning ‘forgiven to you’, or literally ‘halal to you’, conveying that the sacrifice is an instantiation of divine abundance, mediated by the giver. It is then the efficacy of the performative acts associated with the sacrifice complex that (i) establishes ‘halal metavalue’ and (ii) maintains the circulation of sacrifice within the horizontal realms between villagers, whereby divine abundance is mediated by everyone involved in the exchange networks. What emerges here is an economic theology of halal exchange that may help us to understand why all households in the village Brdo, even those without any means to purchase a ram for sacrifice, continue to be actively involved in the annual cycle of exchange of sacrifice and mediating divine abundance, because without their acceptance of the sacrifice, the well-off households who can afford to give would not be able to access an ongoing flow of abundance (Mittermaier 2014: 524).¹² Let me now turn to the instances of how ‘halal metavalue’ enables transvaluation and commensurability across divergent value domains.

Halal Money: From Value to Virtue

One winter morning during my fieldwork, I helped Remza from the neighbourhood where I was living to search for another neighbour, Resula. At the time Remza’s household had been receiving a 2 litre bottle of milk every other day from Resula, whose family is well-off and owning a flock of sheep and three cows. The reason was that the cow owned by Remza’s family had just given birth to a calf. All Remza’s effort at the time went towards feeding the calf as well as possible in order to sell it and get much-needed cash. It is common in the villages that whenever someone’s cow is pregnant or is suckling a newborn calf, neighbours supply the house with milk during the period. How should the extra supply of milk be reciprocated? This is a pertinent question, as many families rely on selling homemade dairy products to secure some household income. This was also the case with Remza who went to negotiate with old Resula over how an extra supply of milk ought to be paid back. When we finally found her, she just said ‘you don’t need to give us anything. If we need something, we will tell you; and if we don’t, then it’s *halal*’. Remza’s family has been struggling in the past decade, like many families in the village, with unemployment and debts, and trading in surplus dairy production was their only regular source of income. Following this conversation, Resula never asked and the bottles of milk that she had given them became halal.

This example as well as that of the greengrocer Jusuf both illustrate how ‘halal metavalue’ operates across different value domains as instances of halal exchange. We need

to pause here though. As Lambek (2015a: 239) suggests, the act of sacrifice opens ‘moral vectors’, introduces ‘specific commitments’ and establishes the ‘seriousness of the ensuing values and acts that are at stake’. In day-to-day situations, halal metavalues that are established in the performative acts of the ritual sacrifice and exchange are performed as virtue (i.e. to be a good neighbour, spouse, Muslim). In other words, it is realised by means of virtuous acts and the exercise of judgment as to how and when an exchange will be acted upon as a halal exchange (Lambek 2015a: 218). Hence Resula’s decision not to ask for the milk to be paid back, and thus to consider it instead as being offered the halal way. Similarly, the greengrocer’s decision to give any fruit or vegetables from his stall to anyone in need. Consequently, virtuous acts involving the performance of exchanges of goods and services, the halal way are part and parcel of the economic theology of halal exchange as they mediate divine abundance and grace among fellow villagers.

If the socio-economic restructuring in post-war years caused social redistribution in Bosnia–Herzegovina to decline, the economic theology of halal exchange continues to offer villagers a justification, whereby economic and divine resources (i.e. abundance) can be considered as exchangeable and commensurable in relation to halal metavalues. It is again the work of performative acts in the moment of exchange (Keane 2001), namely the performative acts of *halalosum/kabulosum*, that the kind of virtue they perform is established. These performative acts maintain such exchanges within the realm of halal metavalues rather than within the realm of (neoliberal) economic value.

The situations in which Islamic economic theologies have been invoked to address and reanimate the realm of socio-economic ruptures and transformations are multifaceted (e.g. Maurer 2005; Mittermaier 2013; Osella and Rudnyckij 2017; Rudnyckij 2014). In her recent work in rural Turkey, Kimberly Hart showed how village Muslims implement the moral conception of *hayir* (good deeds) to respond ‘to the social effects of economic change, as well as to address their personal quests for salvation’ (2013: 74). These concerns are not dissimilar to those of my friends and interlocutors in the Zvijezda highlands. Yet rather than turning them into a kind of theodicy of economic misfortune and inequalities (e.g. Comaroff and Comaroff 1999), village Muslims utilize and cultivate the virtuous acts of *hayir* to create ‘networks of charitable activity, [and] distributing goods’ (Hart 2013: 76). The value domain and *hayir* acts thus unfold as a form of economic redistribution and social justice, as local instances of sadaqa or almsgiving, and as an act of generosity. As Hart puts it, ‘*hayir* is spread across small acts, the accumulation of which show attention to all needs, not only material inequities’ (Hart 2013: 78).

Hart’s observation is poignant as it illustrates two points. First, it shows how the realm of culturally specific metavalues unfolds in individual virtuous acts of ‘small gestures’ of generosity and care. Even the simplest offering, such as giving biscuits and surplus olive oil, or gestures of compassion between well-off and poor villagers, as Hart documents, are a small act of sacrifice that earns good deeds. As such these acts are situated in the wider moral texture of vital exchange with the divine. Secondly, Hart’s ethnography questions, along with Amira Mittermaier’s and others’ work (Brenner 1998; Rudnyckij 2010) the often overdetermined forces of neoliberal

sacrifice, the question of the (in)commensurability of these exchanges becomes a case in point.¹³

Let me consider how the rising inequalities within the village transform the conduct of mutual help and assistance. During the years of my fieldwork, it has become increasingly common to pay a sum of money in return in those instances when the person who asked for assistance was not able to reciprocate. However, helping a neighbour and being paid in return are two different exchange orders and regimes of value. So for example, having a tractor to carry firewood or hay from distant places, both crucial for the day-to-day functioning of the house, or having a horse for ploughing the hilly fields that surround the village have become a form of 'asset'. The villagers who owned these highly in-demand assets are the very same well-off villagers who also have resources to purchase rams for the sacrifice. In turn, whenever anyone else needs help with ploughing or transportation, there is no possibility for her to reciprocate in kind. This is the moment when money comes in, as the villagers make reimbursements in cash to cover the costs of petrol, amortisation and time. However, as in the previous case, these transactions are also performed virtuously, and accompanied with the exchange of words that qualify the act of help as an instance of halal exchange. The exchange of words takes place over coffee in the house of the receiver of help, starting with the question 'What do I owe you?' which is immediately followed by rhetorical denying of any debt, 'Nothing'. However, this denial takes place without uttering *halal*. Only after the question is raised again does the receiver give an amount that she considers adequate, or according to her means. Only then is *halal* uttered without immediately checking how much money she was given. By performing the transactions within the realm of halal metavalue, any amount is acceptable and my village friends referred to such forms of cash as 'halal money' (*halal pare*) instead. These instances, of course, should not be romanticised. During my fieldwork, I often overhead or was told by the owners of tractors or horses that they were not paid enough to even cover their expenses. They have never raised this issue publicly, however. The reaction that usually followed such laments was 'but what can I do if they are struggling to get by?' referring to these disadvantaged villagers. In Brdo, there were two tractor owners, who became notorious lamenters, yet they never asked for more money during acts of assistance and help either, and whatever they were paid was considered halal. As a result, the two men tried to keep themselves busy and were sometimes unavailable so as to avoid any request for assistance, rather than asking for more money. If however they happened to be asked, usually as a last resort given their reputation, it was hard for them to decline.

The notion of purified wealth and money is well elaborated in the context of Islamic charity and obligatory charitable payments (Benthall 1999; Singer 2008), as well as for Islamic banking practices (Maurer 2005; Rudnyckij 2013, 2014). Similarly, in the Zvijska highlands, the small gestures of help and care performed the halal way keep any potentially monetised transactions outside of the regime of direct equivalence (Dresch 1998: 125), and position them rather as virtuous acts in regard to halal metavalue. In other words, the invoking of 'halal metavalue' acts in situations of increasing monetization of exchange, and economic inequalities among villagers as a virtuous act of

'generalised moral abstraction of value across otherwise incommensurable domains' (Maurer 2005: 104). So what unfolds here, I suggest, is a process of transvaluation of economic value (cash) into halal metavalue (deeds), and thus into the economic theology of halal exchange, rather than the other way around.

Of Debt and Forgiveness

If there is one depiction that could capture shared reflections on everyday life in Bosnia–Herzegovina today, it would probably be living in-debt (Jasarevic 2017). Ranging from micro-loans with high interests that have plagued the country, delayed or indefinitely postponed salaries, to the country's massive indebtedness, these are instances of how life-in-debt experiences increasingly reanimate people's reflections on life itself in post-war Bosnia–Herzegovina. 'I wish I had a regular income', 'debts killed him', or an Islamic healer advertising himself in newspapers as a 'fighter against sorcery, misfortune, unemployment and indebtedness' are just a few examples from my field notes. How does debt on such a massive scale entwine with the economic theology of halal exchange? In the previous section, I touched upon situations when money and payments for help and services are involved, and what ethical dilemmas these entail. This raises a question about debt and forgiveness. If the economic theology of halal exchange unfolds in acts of transvaluation of economic value into halal metavalue, how does such economic theology attend to various forms of debts? Specifically, I am concerned with the act of *halalit* (to forgive, be merciful).

Here I follow the lead offered by Larisa Jasarevic (2012, 2017). In her splendid analysis, Jasarevic shows how notions of the good life and a decent death in post-war Bosnia–Herzegovina are undermined and underwritten by debt. Jasarevic aptly illustrates how, for example, due to a need for quick cash, many Bosnians in precarious economic situations are selling family graves, thus cutting off 'persisting obligations and exchanges between the living and the dead' (2012: 25). The ability to manage one's debts or the lack thereof, and more generally facing these troubles with a 'lack of abundance', have become a pervasive part of everyday experience across Bosnian society at large (with the sole exception of ethno-political elites, Kurtović 2015). Is death the only escape from debt then?

I was first alerted to these questions in the early days of my fieldwork in the Zvijezda highlands, while attending a Muslim funeral (*dženaza*) in a nearby village. It was at the very end of the outdoor prayers, when the crowd gathered around the coffin (*tabut*), and the imam leading the ceremony asked the assembly to 'halal' (*halalit*) the soul of the deceased. In the context of the funeral, the utterance *halalit* was an act of forgiveness of any debts and sins the deceased person may have accumulated during her life in order to purify her soul. There are other profoundly life-transforming events, when the living ask for forgiveness – for example, the hajj pilgrimage. When someone decides that she would like to undergo the hajj pilgrimage, this is preceded by sponsoring a feast (*mevlud*) and a collective prayer (*ikrar dova*) in the mosque, and subsequently feeding the entire village and other guests. The crucial and highly emotional moment during the event is when the pilgrim-to-be stands up and asks

the assembly in the mosque to forgive (*halalit*) all her debts and for all her sins to be cancelled before leaving for Mecca, otherwise the pilgrimage would not be accepted by God.

Jasarevic describes the act of *halalit* as a radical forgiveness in the context of post-mortem exchange, and I would also include other events that transform the courses of people's lives, such as the *hajj* pilgrimage. The act of forgiveness can also be tracked in the instances of everyday small gestures of assistance and help, when *halalit* 'dismisses an unreturned or excessive gift or favour' (Jasarevic 2012: 35). Put differently, the act of forgiving, if performed the halal way (*halalit*), transvalues debts as a matter of halal metavalue and divine abundance instead. However, the possibility of 'forgiving' inevitably implies a possibility of not forgiving, or 'remembering' the debt as Jasarevic also correctly points out. The haunting possibility of not forgiving ('I won't halal you') is always present and such situations do occur thus rendering halal as meaningfully significant. Due to the limited space, I focus here on the most common instance of 'not forgiving', namely an uneven accumulation of value through manipulation with inheritance or property, and with the land in particular.

During my fieldwork in the village Brdo, a tension ensuing from not forgiving (not 'halaling') arose between siblings over inherited property. Partible inheritance is a widely shared practice in the villages, but in reality it is also highly gendered. After documenting several dozen case studies of inheritance negotiations within households across the Zvijezda highlands, it is safe to say that women who marry outside of their villages rarely claim a share of the family land or any other family property, whereas brothers divide the inherited property equally. In turn, women receive compensation, for example in dowry expenses.¹⁴ This practice has its roots in the legal notion of *miraz* (from Turkish/Arabic *mirat* 'to divide'), describing any property passing to a daughter (Hammel 1968: 18–19; Lockwood 1975: 64). However, as far as I could trace it, any *miraz* beyond the dowry expenses has been seldom demanded by women. During my fieldwork, I came across only two instances of women claiming a *miraz* on property, namely the land. This happened several years after the women married into distant villages, and did not maintain any vital relations with the village apart from very occasional visits and phone calls. Both cases opened a number of emotionally charged debates, social commentaries and a diagnosis of the disruptive post-war development in the country that has turned siblings into enemies.

In particular, in one of the cases it turned out that the sister – whom I call Lejla – was generously compensated in her dowry in the late 1990s. Now Lejla wanted to sell her part of the inherited land to her own brothers. The reason for claiming the share and trying to sell it was that Lejla's family struggled to deal with the debts that they had accumulated over the years due to mismanagement of high-interest micro-loans. The land in her natal village seemed to Lejla and her family to be a source of immediate cash revenue. However, land in the Zvijezda highlands is considered a source of family vitality and divine abundance (Henig n.d.), and as such is a form of inalienable possession that is guarded over generations and that links individuals and families over time. Moreover, as Annete Weiner (1992: 4) suggests, 'kinship is a decisive marker and maker of value' in the manner in which it expresses and legitimates (i.e. cosmologically

authenticates) the relationships between productive resources and social relations. In Brdo and other villages, this relationship is primarily conceived of as a realm of halal metavalue. In turn, Lejla's attempt to claim the *miraz* back in this situation, to paraphrase Lambek (2015a), was an act that opened different 'moral vectors' and commitments, and the existing values and acts at stake. It meant not only withdrawing from dominant kinship relations but also from halal exchange, and instead imposing the calculative logic of economic value and profit that makes everything commensurable, including the land of the ancestors or kinship relations. It is perhaps hardly surprising, then, that the entire discussion among the villagers in both cases was centred on the fact that the two women did not want to halal-forgive their respective *miraz*. Although these were rather unusual cases, the two 'not-halal-events' have since become a haunting reminder of how easily an act of (halal) forgiveness can slip into the moral quandary of debt relationships.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined the workings of an economic theology of halal exchange in post-war Bosnia–Herzegovina. In doing so, I have sought to show how a serious engagement with economic theologies of divine abundance can unsettle claims about an all-pervasive neoliberalization of everyday life that have recently been dominating many debates both within anthropology and beyond. Drawing on Michael Lambek's work on value and virtue, I focused specifically on halal metavalue, how it is established, and its capacity of transvaluation and mediation of divine abundance across divergent regimes of value. I argued that it is the performative act of *halal* in the course of social life that underlies divergent spheres of exchange, and shapes moral registers and notions of value, as well as virtues. Economic theology of halal exchange thus bridges domains that are often deemed to be, or analysed as separate: religion and the market. It also outlines a parallel logic of relating to the divine that is concerned with an ethics of generosity and sharing rather than with the calculative logic of self-interest to advance one's relationship with God in the afterlife.

I started this paper with a thought experiment on Marcel Mauss and *The Gift*, and asked what Mauss would have written about gifts if he had engaged with the concept of halal to inform his thoughts on social justice in human societies inspired by notions of Islamic charity and alms giving. To follow up with this experiment would require further re-engagement with notions such as *halal* or *baraka*, *hayir* or luck and fortune (e.g. Gaibazzi 2015) to further explore their 'magical value', which Mauss saw was 'still present in *sadaqa*' (2016: 82) in his attempts to challenge the dominant economic orthodoxies of his time. These are some of the key moral vectors of Islamic economic theologies that underlie the very economies of life, and that remind us that 'since everything belongs to God, our borrowed wealth ought to be shared' (Mittermaier 2013: 287). Ultimately, this approach would enable us to further nuance how a specific reconfiguration of cultural values provides a significant basis for moral imagination and innovative practice and virtuous action at a time of radical change and uncertainty, be it in post-war Bosnia–Herzegovina or elsewhere.

Notes

1. Here, I follow Michael Lambek's argument that across human history, there has been a dialectic between 'establishing absolute values against which everything else is relative and to be measured – hence rendered commensurable to one another – and discovering things that render those absolutes relative in turn' (2015a: 227).
2. In Islamic scriptural reasoning, the category of halal stands for allowed, permissible, lawful and moral actions and forms of conduct, as opposed to the category of haram, that of unlawful, prohibited and immoral conduct. However, as I illustrate throughout the paper, these categories are lived and experienced rather hermeneutically as a matter of judgment, evaluation and performative acts in specific historical situations (Lambek 2015b).
3. This expression is taken from Marshall Sahlins' critique of analyses of imperialism: 'There is a certain historiography that is quick to take the "great game" of imperialism as the only game in town' (1993: 6).
4. I am grateful to Giovanni da Col for helping me to formulate this question.
5. Elsewhere in the Gift, Mauss also invokes the Hebrew origins of sadaqa, that of *tzedakah*. The original meaning according to Mauss was 'exclusively justice' (2016: 82), and changed 'in the era of the Mishnah, from the victory of "Paupers" in Jerusalem, the moment when the doctrine of charity and alms was born, which spread around the world with Christianity and Islam' (2016). Amy Singer similarly suggests that in Hebrew the meaning was primarily a moral one, referring to justice or righteousness. She further argues that these were understood to be acts of religious merit (2008: 4).
6. On the role of faith-based charities during the war see Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan (2003).
7. For earlier scholarship on baraka, see: Geertz (1968); Gilsenan (1982); Pitt-Rivers ([1992] 2011).
8. On attending to Islamic legal reasoning through the lenses of ethics, see Clarke (2012); Hefner (2016). Indeed, as Marsden writes, although 'it is often assumed that moral judgement in Muslim societies is dominated by a clear-cut binary that defines action and thought as being either lawful (*halal*) or forbidden [*haram*]', and '[m]orality in Muslim societies is thus widely thought of as being an uncontested and ready-made category', there is 'no simple formula emanating from puritanical Islam which establishes what people think' (Marsden 2005: 54).
9. The numbers slightly vary from year to year, depending on villagers' success in finding work that would coincide with the time of the feast. Nonetheless, it is safe to say that the decrease has been by a third.
10. In the post-war years, historical inequalities between households resurfaced because subsistence farming requires resources and land in particular. Those households who control enough land, regularly arrange barter exchange for various services, and also of young rams for hay from their meadows.
11. So whereas for Weiner (1992), the 'cosmological authentication' enables us to explore how hierarchies are established and objectified in social life through different forms of reciprocity and exchange, in the case I discuss here, 'cosmological authentication' works the other way round, as an active force to flatten hierarchies and inequalities engendered by the post-war socio-economic restructuring.
12. As one of Mittermaier's (2014: 524) informants puts it "'The poor don't need us; we need the poor. They're our gate to paradise,'" meaning 'that the poor are better off than the wealthy because they will go to paradise without being questioned first' (see also Kochuyt 2009).
13. Indeed, as Lambek (2015a: 221) puts it, 'the incommensurability of ethical and economic value is precisely their distinctive constitutions with respect to commensurability'.
14. Nowadays, this means mainly wedding-related expenses and furnishing new household with white goods and utensils.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank first and foremost my Bosnian friends and interlocutors. The author is grateful to Giovanni Da Col for our extended conversations. The author also thanks Michael Lambek, Jonathan Mair, Magnus Marsden, Amira Mittermaier, Emma O'Driscoll, and Daniela Peluso with whom he discussed various parts of my article at different stages. Special thanks go to the anonymous reviewers for their very helpful feedback and suggestions, and to Nils Bubandt who offered generous and helpful editorial feedback. All shortcomings, of course, are mine.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

David Henig  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6111-6523>

References

- Atia, Mona. 2013. *Building a House in Heaven: Pious Neoliberalism and Islamic Charity in Egypt*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press.
- Benthall, Jonathan. 1999. Financial Worship: The Quranic Injunction of Almsgiving. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 5(1):27–42.
- Benthall, Jonathan & Jérôme Bellion-Jourdan. 2003. *The Charitable Crescent: Politics of Aid in the Muslim World*. London: I. B. Taurius.
- Bloch, Maurice. 1992. *Prey Into Hunter: The Politics of Religious Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bowen, John R. 1992. On Scriptural Essentialism and Ritual Variation: Muslim Sacrifice in Sumatra and Morocco. *American Ethnologist*, 19(4):656–671.
- Brenner, Suzanne April. 1998. *The Domestication of Desire: Women, Wealth and Modernity in Java*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bringa, Tone. 1995. *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way. Identity and Community in a Central Bosnian Village*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Brisebarre, Anne-Marie. 1993. The Sacrifice of 'Id al Kabir: Islam in the French Suburbs. *Anthropology Today*, 9(1):9–12.
- Brković, Čarna. 2016. Scaling Humanitarianism: Humanitarian Actions in a Bosnian Town. *Ethnos*, 81(1):99–124.
- Clarke, Morgan. 2012. The Judge as Tragic Hero: Judicial Ethics in Lebanon's Shari'a Courts. *American Ethnologist*, 39(1):106–121.
- Comaroff, Jean & John L. Comaroff. 1999. Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony. *American Ethnologist*, 26(2):279–303.
- Delaney, Carol. 1991. *The Seed and the Soil: Gender and Cosmology in Turkish Village Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Dresch, Paul. 1998. Mutual Deception: Totality, Exchange, and Islam in the Middle East. In *Marcel Mauss: A Centenary Tribute*, edited by W. James and N. Allen, pp. 111–133. Oxford: Bergahn.
- Gaibazzi, Paolo. 2015. The Quest for Luck: Fate, Fortune, Work and the Unexpected Among Gambian Soninke Hustlers. *Critical African Studies*, 7(3):227–242.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1968. *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Gilsenan, Michael. 1982. *Recognising Islam: An Anthropologist's Introduction*. London: Crom Helm.

- Guyer, Jane I. 2016. Translator's Introduction: The Gift That Keeps on Giving. In *The Gift. Expanded Edition*, edited by M. Mauss, pp. 1–25. Chicago, IL: HAU Books.
- Hammel, E. A. 1968. *Alternative Social Structures and Ritual Relations in the Balkans*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Han, Clara. 2012. *Life in Debt: Times of Care and Violence in Neoliberal Chile*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hart, Kimberly. 2013. *And Then We Work for God: Rural Sunni Islam in Western Turkey*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Hefner, Robert W. (ed). 2016. *Shari'a Law and Modern Muslim Ethics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Henig, David. 2012. 'Knocking on My Neighbour's Door': On Metamorphoses of Sociality in Rural Bosnia. *Critique of Anthropology*, 32(1):3–19.
- . 2016a. A Good Deed is not a Crime: Moral Cosmologies of Favours in Muslim Bosnia. In *Economies of Favour After Socialism*, edited by D. Henig and N. Makovicky, pp. 181–202. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2016b. Fragments of Village Life and the Rough Ground of the Political in Post-War BiH. In *Negotiating Social Relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Semiperipheral Entanglements*, edited by S. Jansen, Č. Brković, and V. Čelebičić, pp. 46–59. London: Routledge.
- . n.d. *The Embers of Allah: Cosmologies of Vital Exchange in the Central Bosnian Highlands*. (Unpublished book manuscript).
- Hromadžić, Azra. 2015. *Citizens of an Empty Nation: Youth and State-Making in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Jansen, Stef. 2015. *Yearnings in the Meantime: 'Normal Lives' and the State in a Sarajevo Apartment Complex*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Jasarevic, Larisa. 2012. Grave Matters and the Good Life: On a Finite Economy in Bosnia. *Cambridge Anthropology*, 30(1):25–39.
- . 2017 *Health and Wealth on the Bosnian Market: Intimate Debt*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Keane, Webb. 2001. Money is No Object: Materiality, Desire, and Modernity in an Indonesian Society. In *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture*, edited by F.R. Myers, pp. 65–90. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.
- Kochuyt, Thierry. 2009. God, Gifts and Poor People: On Charity in Islam. *Social Compass*, 56(1):98–116.
- Kurtović, Larisa. 2015. 'Who Sows Hunger, Reaps Rage': On Protest, Indignation and Redistributive Justice in Post-Dayton Bosnia-Herzegovina. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 15 (4):639–659.
- Lambek, Michael. 2015a. Value and Virtue. In *The Ethical Condition: Essay on Action, Person and Value*, pp. 214–241. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- . 2015b. The Value of (Performative) Acts. In *The Ethical Condition: Essay on Action, Person and Value*, pp. 282–301. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Lockwood, William G. 1975. *European Moslems: Economy and Ethnicity in Eastern Bosnia*. New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Mair, Jonathan, Thomas Hylland Eriksen, James Laidlaw, Keir Martin, & Soumhya Venkatesan. 2015. The Concept of Neoliberalism has Become an Obstacle to the Anthropological Understanding of the Twenty-First Century. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 21(4):911–923.
- Marsden, Magnus. 2005. *Living Islam: Muslim Religious Experience in Pakistan's North-West Frontier*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Maurer, Bill. 2001. Engineering an Islamic Future: Speculations on Islamic Financial Alternatives. *Anthropology Today*, 17(1): 8–11.
- . 2005. *Mutual Life, Limited: Islamic Banking, Alternative Currencies, Lateral Reason*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Mauss, Marcel. 2016. *The Gift*. Expanded Edition. Chicago, IL: HAU Books.

- Mittermaier, Amira. 2013. Trading with God: Islam, Calculation, Excess. In *A Companion to the Anthropology of Religion*, edited by J. Boddy and M. Lambek, pp. 274–293. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.
- . 2014. Beyond Compassion: Islamic Voluntarism in Egypt. *American Ethnologist*, 41(3):518–531.
- Muehlebach, Andrea. 2012. *The Moral Neoliberal: Welfare and Citizenship in Italy*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Ortner, Sherry B. 2016. Dark Anthropology and Its Others: Theory Since the Eighties HAU: *Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 6(1):47–73.
- Osella, Filippo, & Daromir Rudnykij (eds). 2017. *Religion and the Morality of the Market: Anthropological Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pitt-Rivers, Julian. [1992] 2011. The Place of Grace in Anthropology. HAU: *Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 1(1):423–450.
- Rudnykij, Daromir. 2010. *Spiritual Economies: Islam, Globalization, and the Afterlife of Development*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell.
- . 2013. From Wall Street to Halal Street: Malaysia and the Globalization of Islamic Finance. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 72(4):831–848.
- . 2014. Economy in Practice: Islamic Finance and the Problem of Market Reason. *American Ethnologist*, 41(1):110–127.
- Sahlins, Marshall. 1993. Goodbye to *Tristes Tropes*: Ethnography in the Context of Modern World History. *The Journal of Modern History*, 65(1): 1–25.
- Schielke, Samuli. 2015. *Egypt in the Future Tense: Hope, Frustration and Ambivalence Before and After 2011*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Singer, Amy. 2008. *Charity in Islamic Societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Weiner, Annette B. 1992. *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Werbner, Pnina. 1990. Economic Rationality and Hierarchical Gift Economies: Value and Ranking Among British Pakistanis. *Man*, 25(2):266–285.