

Increasing Spiritual Sensitivity and Faith-Based Service Provision: Pathways to Islamic Social Work



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Abstract Social work has been characterised in recent years by a growing sensitivity to religious and spiritual issues, both leading back to its historical roots and responding to the challenges of contemporary post-secular society. This sensitivity also requires more knowledge about and attention to the specific needs of Muslims as service users, without neglecting their great diversity. The topic of ‘Islamic social work’, situated within this context, does not only concern Muslim beneficiaries in the field of mainstream social work, but also the central, active role that Muslim communities play: it therefore calls into question a merely individual focus. For Muslim faith-based organisations, Islamically-motivated social ideas and thought are also important. In Western contexts, which are often characterised by mistrust shown to Islam and Muslims, reflection on what contribution can be made to the common good within the framework of pluralistic societies is required. Finally, Islamic social work can be considered in relation to the broader development of social work, which is characterised by a critical approach to power-relations and domination, a sensitivity to diversity and an openness to alternative forms of social work. This chapter introduces the book “Exploring Islamic Social Work. Between Community and the Common Good” by analysing the state of research, identifying guiding questions and then developing and presenting the structure of the volume. Its focus is on contexts of Islamic social work and its target groups, its theological and ethical foundations, as well as its inclusion into general social work discourse.

Keywords Islam · Social work · Spirituality · Faith-based organisations · Community · Human rights

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Introduction

The term ‘Islamic social work’ might seem a contradiction in itself: how can largely secular social work discourses and Islamic thought on social issues be brought together at all? The current book seeks to meet exactly this challenge, operating at the interface between Islamic studies and social work research. It aims to contribute both to mainstream social work, which is faced with cultural as well as religious diversity, and to Islamic studies, which is proving itself as a field of practice. In the present-day context where topics linked to Islam often result in highly controversial discussions, researching Islamic social work is no exception. While some might fundamentally criticise Islamic social work, others seem to highlight its merits in a rather apologetic manner. In contrast to both these approaches, this publication aims to analyse the manifold relational dynamics of Islamic social work and place them in a wider context. Looking at issues linked to Islam as a strongly “public religion” (Casanova, 1994) can also be seen as an indication of a soul-searching process within mainstream (Western) social work, an expression of its self-critique of the dogmatic secular as well as of the “profession’s proselytising attitude” (Gray & Coates, 2008, 13).

Despite a growing interest in Islamic social work, the research on this topic is quite scant, as opposed to subjects such as spirituality and social work, or faith-based initiatives with a Christian background (Bielefeld & Cleveland, 2013a). This is partly because Islamic social work remains quite unknown and less visible, which is why it has been characterised as “hidden voluntary social work” (Borell & Gerdner, 2011). Addressing this gap, this volume brings together contributions that, through theoretical reflection as well as empirical research, shed light on various facets of Islamic social work.

Using the term ‘Islamic social work’ might evoke particular geographic associations. The focus of this book, however, is not on the indigenisation of social work in so-called ‘Islamic world’ contexts (Ragab, 2016, 339; Soliman, 2013), but rather on ‘Western’ contexts including Europe, North America, Australia, and South Africa. Nor is it about international Muslim humanitarian aid and international charity organisations, which are also partly based in Western contexts (Benthall, 2016). Due to the immigration of populations with Muslim faith and culture and a consequent pluralisation of Western societies, the topic of Islamic social work constitutes a major challenge to the respective countries (Gray & Coates, 2008, 18). The focus on Western contexts, however, needs to be substantially differentiated, primarily because of the variety of welfare regimes in these countries (Göçmen, 2013). Despite this diversity, however, some similarities, including Western Muslims’ experiencing of othering (Husain, 2019, 12; Husain & Ross-Sheriff, 2011, 372) can be identified, too. Whereas in Muslim majority countries, Islamic social work can be seen in the context of identity preservation policies, thus evolving from western-style social work to an “Islamisation of knowledge” (Ragab, 2016, 330), in Western contexts it is instead more an encounter at the interface between religious motivations and largely secular practices. One major reason why the Western context is of

particular relevance in relation to this topic is that there is an ongoing debate, both in integration politics and within Muslim communities themselves, about indigenising Islam as a measure to promote Western Muslims' contribution to the common good (Ramadan, 2004). Conversely, one can also speak of "Islamically indigenised social work" (Barise, 2005), the result of appropriating a secular concept within an Islamic framework.

Linking the focus on Islam to wider developments within social work, the following discussion is structured into five parts: the subsequent second section reviews recent developments in social work with regard to spirituality and religion, while the third and fourth sections focus on the role of communities and faith-based organisations linked to Islam. The fifth section consists of contemplations on Islamic social work as an alternative form of social work. A key goal of these parts is also to present and structure the current state of research. The sixth section seeks to unfold the structure of the present book and its contributions.

A Growing Awareness of Spiritual and Religious Dimensions in Social Work

It is widely recognised that social work developed from religious forerunners, becoming progressively secularised from the 1920s, and eventually establishing itself as an entirely secular profession (Loue, 2017, 17; Pierson, 2011, 9–11). In many cases, the emergence of social work as a modern discipline meant a secularisation of services that were formerly provided by Christian philanthropy and charities. A process of rationalisation and the limited ability of the churches to cope with the rapidly emerging new urban proletariat were causational factors in this transformation (Bowpitt, 1998, 681). As this shift in orientation gave rise to an attitude that was critical of religion, if not outright anti-religious, a rather "uneasy relationship between social work and its religious origins" (Shaw, 2018, 414) is understandable.

Similar conflictual developments took place in other applied fields and disciplines such as medicine, psychology and nursing (Sheridan, 2009, 120) which became linked to a general debate on secularism and religion. In this way, previously religious domains became secular, and religious issues were increasingly regarded as a private affair. This development had a strong impact on religious organisations in the field of social work, which likewise often turned into quasi-secular service providers. There was even a certain period when being more secular meant being a more professional social worker and vice versa (Karic & Ehlke, 2018; Ross-Sheriff, 2017, 13). More specifically, however, the impact of this very broadly described tendency differs from one context to another and is related to the specific legal and political framework of each country; and, in turn, how far individual nations favour the inclusion of religious organisations in the field of social services.

Parallel to the new perception of the public role of religion, since the 1990s social work has experienced a “spiritual turn” (Gray, 2013, 217). This development *de facto* signifies a “return to social work’s roots that [were] grounded in spirituality” (Loue, 2017, 17–18) and a tendency towards a “respectful and knowledgeable inclusion of diverse religious and spiritual perspectives” (Loue, 2017, 18). This does not mean the re-integration of primarily secular social work, or its transformation into a religious framework, but rather a stronger consideration of spirituality within social work. In contrast to religion as “an institutionalised system of beliefs and practices concerning the supernatural realm” (Lunn, 2009, 937), thus comprising “the outward and objectified elements of a tradition” (Roof, 2003, 138), spirituality has a more personal and individual character and is therefore more congruent with contemporary social work than religion. Assuming that spirituality aims at “reaching, through some regimen of self-transformation, one’s greatest potential” (Roof, 2003, 138), it corresponds to resource-oriented approaches in social work. Consequently, the focus lies on the convergence between social work and spirituality rather than the juxtaposition of them (Crisp, 2010, 21). An example might be to consider whether or not to include prayer in social work (Loue, 2017, 23–24; Sheridan, 2009) – an issue that involves both the beneficiaries’ needs and the social worker’s professionalism. This example illustrates again that religion and spirituality have far-reaching overlaps and that religion can be practised in the form of spirituality. Therefore, in a broadly understood sense, spirituality includes religion, so that the opening of social work to spirituality can also increase its religious sensitivity.

Such a change is part of a much larger paradigm shift in society often labelled as “post-secular” (Beaumont, 2018), which involves a critical reflection on the secular paradigm. Post-secularity does not mean an abolition of secular principles, but rather their expansion and a re-consideration of the role of religion in different domains. Different institutional and professional contexts, including social work, have been affected by this development (Ratti, 2018, 118). It has become evident that social work as a “holistic profession” (Crisp, 2010, 23) has to consider an all-encompassing view of the human being, which also includes spirituality and religion. Against this background, Julia Shaw speaks of “post-secular social work” with the following orientation:

Accordingly, post-secular social work recognises correlations between social work, faith-based social action and post-liberal ethics of care as indicative of an alternative and supplementary social welfare paradigm to the bureaucratic and consumerist models purported by both the public and private sectors. (2018, 424)

Post-secular social work, understood in this way, emphasises the relational character of the human being and forms a critical counterweight to a merely economic perspective on social services. It is not a simple return of religion, but rather a synthesis of spiritual and religious traditions with contemporary ethically-oriented models. Post-secular social work, as “spiritually sensitive social work” (Canda & Furman, 2010, 1) concerns the relationship between social workers and beneficiaries within institutional and broader social contexts. There are specific ethical and

professional requirements for social workers who need to build up their “spiritual competence” (Chaney & Church, 2017, 39), in order to respond to the spiritual needs of service users and to avoid both an over- and an underestimation of religion and spirituality.

Moreover, knowledge of religion and spirituality in a specific faith is essential when working with the followers of that faith (Ross-Sheriff, 2017, 7). Several studies have detected a lack of specific training in this field and have therefore emphasised a need for more profound qualifications for social workers (Furness & Gilligan, 2010, 2186; Furness & Gilligan, 2014, 777–778). Besides acquiring religious knowledge, social workers also need to include religious and spiritual aspects in a permanent reflection on their professional identity and to observe how their own assumptions interact with the expectations and perceptions of beneficiaries.

Spirituality and religion may be sought as a “liberating” or “empowering resource” (Askeland & Døhlle, 2015, 267). However, in the social worker’s interaction with service users, there is always a danger that Michael Sheridan describes as a “potential of erring in both directions” (Sheridan, 2010, 118), that is, the tendency to either over- or underestimate religion and spirituality. It is therefore crucial to strike a balance between these two poles. This concern is a major issue when it comes to assessing how to consider religious and spiritual aspects during social workers’ interventions. The behaviour and actions of Muslims may be impacted by religious norms and concepts. When dealing with Muslim beneficiaries, there is the risk of categorising them as *homo islamicus*, that is, regarding their gender relations, family arrangements and religious practices as being determined by a stereotyped Islam (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000, 299; Rassool, 2014, 280–282). In so doing, one also runs the risk of perceiving Muslims as a “unique but isolated category” (Ashencaen Crabtree, 2017, 119). In order not to base interventions on unilateral projections, the task is to deconstruct such images and take into account the consequences of such ‘Islamising’ projections for both clients and social workers. To avoid these pitfalls, one should try to understand beneficiaries in the most differentiated way possible (Husain & Ross-Sheriff, 2011). These reflections illustrate that the challenges associated with a spiritual and religious opening of social work are already evident at an individual, but also at a communal level, which will be explored further in the following section.

When it comes to categorising and stereotyping there is yet another challenge, commonly labelled as Islamophobia – also known as anti-Muslim racism or anti-Muslim hostility, with a more individual focus. This phenomenon has a significant impact on Muslims in many regions of the world. It therefore also concerns social work, as experiences of anti-Muslim hostility may impact the situation of service-users (Husain, 2015). Consequently, it has been argued that knowledge about Islamophobia and related phenomena should be part of social work education (Savani et al., 2020). As Islamophobia can be understood as an expression of racism, it is usually approached through anti-racist social work (Dominelli, 2018, 145–147). Regarding Islamophobia as a form of oppression, some scholars have adopted anti-oppressive or human rights social work methods to tackle this issue

(Kandylaki & Kallinikaki, 2018). These sensitise social workers to different types of inequality, instead of focussing only on one type of unequal treatment (Penketh, 2014, 165). By being critical of any kind of discrimination and oppression – as required by their professional deontology (Kamali, 2015, 166) – social workers may be seen by those affected by Islamophobia as their allies (Smith, 2020) in counter-acting this form of discrimination. Their task appears to be the “methodical identification, prevention and reduction of Islamophobia” (Farooqui & Kaushik, 2021, 465). This may also imply taking a critical stance towards prevention programmes and security policies that reproduce Islamophobic clichés (Latham, 2016). Since Islamophobia implies the “power of definition” (Ålund, 1991), a critical stance towards it also entails a critical questioning of one’s own presuppositions and trying to perceive “the other” as subject capable of action, instead of the passive object of one’s own reifying perception. This perspective requires social work “to focus on local knowledges, including the means by which local communities engage in resistance and social justice” (Beck et al., 2017, 69). In other words, overcoming Islamophobia should go beyond the actions of social workers, to also involve communities as actors. Thus, in a broader sense, the empowerment approach pursued here is focused on agency rather than merely looking at the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim communities. An integration of Islamic social work would also help to overcome the hegemonic claim of Western social work in solving social problems (Kamali, 2015, 6).

The Role of Muslim Communities

Taking into consideration the afore-mentioned spiritual turn, the pressing question is not *whether* but *how* to include spiritual and religious dimensions in social work (Sheridan, 2004, 23). Beyond the patterns of perception and interaction between social workers and beneficiaries, there is a further major aspect to examine when considering how social work may move towards meeting the religious and spiritual needs of Muslims. It is not sufficient to look solely at individuals; communities must also be taken into account, as they provide “validation and support from within an identifiable group of people” for religious ideas and practices (Hill et al., 2000, 66). Therefore, it is necessary to consider communities as important points of reference for individuals, but also as service providers, because believers may trust community-based services more easily. Situations that push Muslims to use social services are also linked to “communal challenges they face” (Abdullah, 2015a, 169). Looking back at the decade between 2006 and 2015, Faryal Ross-Sheriff, one of the pioneers in the field, states:

The literature in this decade also seems to focus on how social practitioners should interact with Muslim clients and recognize the strengths of Muslim communities and the positive values embraced by the Islamic tradition. (...) However, few of the articles in the last decade in the electronic search of social work literature accentuated the positive contributions of Muslim communities. (2017, 19)

She therefore formulates, as one of her recommendations to practitioners, the following advice: “And, lastly, use writings about Islam and Muslims from primary sources and learn from diverse groups of Muslims in general and your clients in particular.” (Ross-Sheriff, 2017, 20) This signals an opening for Muslim social thought and practice at a community level. The focus is therefore not only on the capacity of social workers to deal adequately with spiritual and religious issues of Muslim clients, but also on an integration of both Islamic thought and Muslim service-providers, which respond to the specific needs and choices of their clients (Oelkers et al., 2016, 102).

It seems obvious to connect the Islam-related discussion with the more general debate on ‘community social work’, based on local networks and mutual self-help structures, and to allow communities to participate as service providers (Pierson, 2011, 140–141), thus going beyond “individualised forms of social work” (Sheppard, 2006, 241). The latter relies on liberal individualism and neglects the anchorage of values and conceptions of a good life in communities (Clark, 2006). In contrast, multicultural concepts look at what resources communities can contribute (Abdullah, 2015b). Communities can assume different roles by either providing social services themselves or becoming partners of other service-providers and social workers. Therefore, there is a strong potential for social workers to work “with and within the community” (Hardcastle, 2011, 404). Examples of this are collaborations with mosques and imams (Al-Krenawi, 2016) or situations in which a social worker might pass clients on to specific religious service providers (Scourfield et al., 2013, 339). This may not only lead to partnerships between secular and religious organisations but also to interfaith collaborations, which may further contribute to social cohesion (Gärde, 2015).

The community aspect is also a counterweight to a secular understanding of spirituality. Research related to Muslims is critical of such universal concepts of spirituality because in many cases they do not correspond to the self-understanding of Muslims:

We do not mean to suggest that Muslims have wholly unique needs with regard to social work, but rather that Islam is an example of a formal organized religion which expects its followers to conform to doctrinal, ritual and behavioural prescriptions and this expectation challenges individualized flexible notions of spirituality. (Scourfield et al., 2013, 330)

Nevertheless, the relevance of the individual dimension of Islamic normativity cannot be dismissed categorically, as the way Islamic norms are understood and appropriated differs from one individual to another, not to mention the individual aspect of *imān* (belief) as the very basis of religiosity and of *ihsān* (perfection) as spiritual practice. Thus, individual spirituality and collective allegiance to a religion are not in opposition to each other, but rather form a dynamic interaction. Mohd Mahudin et al. perceive three interrelated dimensions of Islam:

A person can submit to God at three levels. At the first level, *islam*, this is done via works or religious practices such as worship and rituals (...) and other social obligations. The *iman* level involves understanding and beliefs in God, his prophets, angels, scriptures, and resurrection. The final level, *ihsan*, in contrast to the previous levels, is the inner dimension

where a person performs supererogatory acts of worship in his/her devotion to Allah. (2016, 113)

Having demonstrated the relevance of the community dimension in social work, the focus can now move towards the precise role of communities as service providers. In numerous Western countries, Muslim groups and organisations respond to the needs of their members by offering consultation services, childcare, educational programmes, spiritual care and material assistance, especially in the context of migration (Banfi, 2014). Although in many cases these activities can be characterised as community-oriented help, more often than not, they go beyond the boundaries of Muslim communities to explicitly benefit society as a whole. In some cases, Muslim bodies start to professionalise their services and to negotiate the ways in which they can become fully recognised service-providers within the welfare state (Nadir, 2013).

There is often controversy about the function of community-based help at the macro (societal) level. The question of how the community-orientation can relate to society as a whole, and to the common good, depends both on the respective welfare system and Muslim self-reflection. In a communitarian model, one would see less of a contradiction between group interests and the common good, as the latter can be realised through individual and community responsibility as the primary agencies of social support (Hardcastle, 2011, 403). Such a balance would, however, require that group interests are compatible with those of the political community as a whole, and that the common good not be imposed on communities in a paternalistic manner. In plural and dynamic societies, the common good cannot be determined *a priori*. Instead, it has to be characterised as a “social and cultural project” (Zaman, 2004, 130). This also requires a broad debate beyond the boundaries of religious communities, that must be able to speak in the spirit of “public theology” as a “mode of religious-social thought, ethical discourse, and expression of opinion on public issues” (Ali, 1995, 67) and make themselves understood to others – including secular parts of society. While the concept of public theology was mainly developed in Christian theologies, it has already been extended to a “critical Islamic public theology” (Sahin, 2018, 38), especially since it deals with general challenges for theologies (Ali, 1995). Public theology represents an appropriate framework for reflection on the common good in a post-secular context, where it is necessary to introduce religious and secular ideas into a broader discourse and to go beyond even a “multi-confessional concept of the common good” (Nekroumi, 2018, 49).

Looking at contemporary Islamic thought, one can find a spectrum of positions, from narrow views to those open to a procedural and participatory understanding of the common good as sensitive to the needs of each individual (Schmid, 2013, 510–513). Generally, the common good or *maṣlaḥa*, to use its Arabic equivalent, has often been employed to open up Islamic normativity to changing situations (Zaman, 2004, 133). It would therefore be wrong to principally negate the contribution of a Muslim community project to the common good. Rather, it is a matter of looking at the context and analysing the relevant motivations and rationales, as part of “a re-evaluation of the contributions that religion made and could continue to

make in providing human services” (Bielefeld & Cleveland, 2013a, 443). In this sense, the role of the community for the common good is not only a theoretical, but also an empirical, question.

Islamic Social Work Provided by Faith-Based Organisations

At the interface of secularity, the spiritual turn and a focus on communities, which are often perceived as ambivalent, the term “Islamic Social Work” (Barise, 2005; Warden, 2013) may evoke contradictory expectations. Therefore, it seems advisable to explore this term further, along with the question of what makes social work ‘Islamic’. For this purpose, the concept of faith-based organisations (FBOs) will be drawn upon in a modified and critical way. Within the limited space of this introduction, it is only possible to refer to selected contributions from this richly diverse field of research. The research on FBOs partly corresponds to the rise of spirituality in social work, but there is a stronger orientation towards faith and religion that goes beyond that. FBOs may provide a broad spectrum of social services ranging from education and training, prevention, advice and counselling (Dinham & Shaw, 2012, 132). However, the “faith factor” often proves to be “difficult to identify and evaluate” (Bielefeld & Cleveland, 2013a, 461). A first criterion for FBOs is through self-identification: finding its expression in the organisation’s name, mission statement or symbolism (Ebaugh et al., 2003, 422). However, organisations sometimes try to present a secular image that might not fully match their self-interpretation. Generally, a complex mixture of religious and secular elements can be assumed in faith-based service provisions.

The widely discussed model of FBOs by Sider and Unruh is a suitable starting point for further reflection, as it shows a high degree of elaboration (Sider & Unruh, 2004; Unruh & Sider, 2005, 103–125). Developed during research on Protestant congregations in the U. S. in the fields of social services and educational programmes, this model is built upon two dimensions. The first dimension consists of a sixfold classification regarding the role faith plays in the organisation: faith-permeated, faith-centred, faith-affiliated, faith-background, faith-secular partnership, and secular. This represents a decreasing scale of intensity in faith and religion. The second dimension focuses on institutional and service-related aspects. It firstly concerns the organisation and includes the following elements: its mission statement; founding; affiliation with religious entities; selection of board, management and staff; financial support and nonfinancial resources; and organised religious practices of personnel. Secondly, it concerns the programmes and projects for service provision in relation to the following issues: religious environment (space and place); religious content; the integration of religious content and other programme components; and the expected connection between religious content and desired outcome. The focus is not on individual religiosity, but on visible aspects of religious organisations and their activities in the public sphere (Sider & Unruh, 2004, 117). Even when talking about *faith*-based organisations, this, ultimately, is

concerned with religious and spiritual components and references in a broader sense and is not limited to faith as a personal and private matter (Newman, 2004, 102). From this perspective, the concept of FBO can be applied to a wide range of organisations.

Firstly, this model shows the wide variety of ways in which an organisation can be an FBO. However, taking into account the sophistication of FBOs, individual cases can be more complex than the typology predicts (Unruh & Sider, 2005, 109). For instance, secular activities sometimes have a religious dimension that is “not intrinsic to the action itself but lies in the meaning attached to it” (Unruh & Sider, 2005, 84). An organisation may also be faith-centred in one aspect and secular in another. Moreover, there are dynamics linked to funding issues. As FBOs remain in competition with parallel secular providers, there is an “isomorphic pressure to meet a basic level of service quality” (Bielefeld & Cleveland, 2013b, 484), if they depend on government funding. This may imply tendencies towards self-secularisation. As FBOs may be religious in their motivation and secular in their service provision, Sider and Unruh’s scale of intensity of religion can be applied in an even more differentiated way. There is much to be said about the hypothesis that Islamic social work is a fluid concept often evading clear attribution. Its ‘Islamicity’ lies primarily in the organisational aspects and can be pronounced to varying degrees. Instead, a hybridity between ‘Islamic’ and secular elements seems to be more common.

In addition, a further aspect needs to be included in the model: Sider and Unruh’s typology is focused on organisations on the one hand and services on the other. The underlying social thought, however, which serves as a motivation and identity-marker is not explicitly integrated, though Unruh and Sider also consider theology as a factor affecting the orientation of congregations (Unruh & Sider, 2005, 153–156). As social welfare studies show, social thought as an interface between theology and social action plays a key role in that context (Gabriel et al., 2013). Therefore, it also deserves due consideration in the case of Islamic social work.

As Sider and Unruh developed their model in the context of a study on Christian organisations, it is necessary to reflect on its adaptability to Muslim FBOs. A key point to consider is the organisational structure of Muslim congregations, which often strongly differ from church congregations, as the former constitute themselves through participation in prayer and other activities not necessarily entailing a formal membership; and they rely on volunteers more strongly than many churches do. In her definition of FBOs, Beth Crisp restricts them to organisations employing professional social workers (Crisp, 2014, 11). This definition would exclude at least some of the social services provided by Muslim bodies and institutions, as the latter function in a pragmatic way and often without the professionalism social work would usually require. Given the smooth transition on the scale from volunteer to professional, such providers should not be excluded in principle. Even if some may be viewed as less stable, less structured and less professional, Muslim providers can serve as “intermediary bodies between diverse Muslim communities and statutory organisations” (Warden et al., 2017, 751). A further issue may be the space in which

the programme takes place. As in many cases, Muslim communities in Western countries dispose of multi-functional spaces, for pragmatic reasons there is often greater proximity to the prayer room than in church community centres; and it is more difficult to separate a “religious space” (Unruh & Sider, 2005, 117) from a secular one.

The general social climate and anti-Muslim attitudes may also have an impact on Muslim FBOs, as they receive special attention in public discourse and come under particular scrutiny. A study on the regulating practices of the Charity Commission of England and Wales regarding Muslim-identified charities (Patel, 2017) has highlighted the mistrust, control and governmentality inherent in these practices, characterising them as “institutional Islamophobia” (Patel, 2017, 42). Such practices hamper the activity and development of Muslim FBOs. Even if this finding cannot be easily generalised to other countries, it implies that discursive factors can have a lasting impact on the situation of Muslim FBOs. At the other end of the spectrum, there may be specific social policy measures that would benefit Muslim organisations and help them to realise their potential for the common good.

To sum up the discussion on Sider and Unruh’s approach: whereas this model is based upon a comprehensive set of criteria, other researchers consider a single element concerning an organisation or its underlying values sufficient to use the label ‘Islamic’ (Abu-Nimer & Kadayifci-Orellana, 2008, 559). The minimal condition for social work to be characterised as Islamic is that at least the underlying social thought has a connection to Islam. Whether the service provision itself has any specific religious reference is not considered substantial. This is independent of the intensity of the religious reference, so that the categories ‘faith-background’ or ‘faith-secular partnership’ would also be included in the definition.

Additionally, when using the concept of FBOs, the criticism levelled at them is inevitably raised, as they are perceived as the “focus of so many hopes and concerns” (Sider & Unruh, 2004, 132). Some critics consider FBOs to be ambivalent when it comes to their contribution and warn that they could be accused of retreating or proselytisation (Gray, 2013, 218; Soulet, 2014). Sometimes they are assumed to have ambiguous goals, as their religious and humanitarian aims may be intermingled, instead of being clearly separated. Due to the religious orientation of FBOs, the question of whom they include as beneficiaries and whom they exclude arises (Kochuyt, 2009, 104), although quite a number of FBOs are universal in their outreach. The proponents of FBOs argue, however, that, despite their limitations, they have the capacity to respond to particular needs of a specific group of beneficiaries. Furthermore, they underline that a diversity of service providers (instead of comprehensive state services) enables a “better fit between organizations and their clients” (Bielefeld & Cleveland, 2013b, 484), because it gives beneficiaries the possibility to choose among providers. Finally, it is argued that the scope of FBOs may in some cases be limited to “service users with a strong theistic world view, wherein everything is interpreted through a religious lens” (Warden et al., 2017, 751). FBOs thus oscillate between being appreciated or dismissed. Against this background, it remains a controversial issue as to what extent FBOs should receive government

support (Furness & Gilligan, 2012). The answer to this question depends on the respective welfare system and its capacity to include FBOs and to recognise their potential contribution to the common good.

Islamic Social Work as Alternative Social Work

It would be narrow-minded to discuss Islamic social work only in relation to spirituality, religion and Muslim communities. The topic also requires self-reflexivity with regard to social work as a whole and to related Muslim activities and reflections in particular. Beyond the general debate on the role of FBOs within the welfare system, some critics cast doubt on the compatibility between Islam and social work. Yet others speak of “social work’s Judeo-Christian value system” (Gray, 2013, 219) to implicitly denounce Islam as being alien or in opposition to these values. In contrast to these views, some authors have underscored that social work shares “many of the same core values as Muslims, although they are expressed in different ways” (Chaney & Church, 2017, 41). From this point of view, congruence between ‘Islamic principles’ and social work values including service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, integrity and competence can be assumed (Chaney & Church, 2017, 37; Husain, 2019, 9). This leads Ashencaen Crabtree, Husain and Spalek (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2008) to plead for social work to be enriched by Islamic perspectives:

However, what has emerged strongly from our work is just how compatible social work as a profession is with traditional Islamic principles and evolving concepts. Thus, the professional social work canon of knowledge can only be enriched by including Islamic perspectives. (170)

While this may sound overly harmonious, the same authors also discuss a “conflict in values” (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2008, 56) – for example, regarding issues like homosexuality. Beyond any discussion of convergence versus divergence of values, however, one should beware of perceiving Islam monolithically, as an unequivocal body of beliefs, principles and practices. In contrast, the starting point here should be self-reflections, interpretations, perspectives and vantage points of Muslims, through which the “diversity and heterogeneity of the Muslim *ummah*” (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2008, 167) and the “tremendous cultural and intra-faith diversity among individuals and communities of Muslims” (Husain, 2019, 2) can come to the fore. Failure to acknowledge points of convergence would promote assimilationist tendencies and hence pressure Islamic social work into adapting to mainstream social work. Depending on what position prevails in a specific context, the reaction in Islamic social work could then fall somewhere between full assimilation and total resistance. An alternative would be, however, for it to take the path of a ‘different social work’ – to draw on a term coined by Eppler and Schär (2015). While ‘alternative’ is mainly used to indicate a deviation from mainstream concepts of social work

(Pollack, 2004), the term ‘critical’ serves to specify how such an alternative can be oriented. Thus, there is a wide overlap in the nuances of meaning of both terms in this context and they are sometimes used interchangeably (Oko, 2006). In order to move in such a direction, the most inspiring source would indeed be critical social work, the characteristics of which can be outlined as follows.

The most conspicuous feature of critical social work is indeed its attempt to address the structural roots of marginalisation (Epple & Schär, 2015; Fook, 2015; MacKinnon, 2009). Even though a structuralist view of poverty and deprivation can be traced back to the writings of the pioneers of settlement movement, including Arnold Toynbee, Samuel and Henrietta Barnett and Jane Addams, as well as to the works of Alice Salomon on social justice, critical social work in the strict sense emerged from the critical theory developed by the leading thinkers of the “Frankfurt School” (Campbell & Baikie, 2012, 70). Despite following its own path of development, it has therefore been consistently critical of “relations of domination and discrimination” (Melter, 2013, 105) and committed to “understanding, critiquing and transforming the profession of social work and the unjust nature of society” (Campbell & Baikie, 2012, 70).

It is noteworthy that the notion of social justice in critical social work has been widened and refined by other sources of inspiration. For instance, feminist social work (Dominelli, 2002) has sensitised critical social work in relation to gendered power relations (for a critical review see Featherstone, 2001). Furthermore, an integration of postcolonial studies into social work (Ranta-Tyrkkö, 2011) has served to avoid “orientalist social work” (Eliassi, 2013). Critical social work is also about questioning Western social work’s conceptual claim to universality and opening it up to alternative concepts in different cultural spaces. This casts a critical light on its claim to exclusive representation that is often not sufficiently thought through:

(...), Westernisation, as the major trend in current globalisation processes, universalises social work as a ‘Western invention’ that should be applied homogenously in every society. (Kamali, 2015, 19)

Impacted by postmodernist philosophical thought, social work has exposed “modernist conceptual practices of power which may reify dominant discourse” (Brown, 2012, 34) and thus promoted an anti-oppression discourse that “addresses issues of diversity, difference, and inclusion” (34). Finally, the thesis that social work is a *human rights profession* (Staub-Bernasconi, 1995, 2010, 2016; Healy, 2008) has made social work receptive to the thought that “human rights and fundamental freedoms are indivisible, and that the full realisation of civil and political rights is impossible without enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights” (UN [Centre for Human Rights], 1994, 5). Advocates of critical social work are, however, sceptical of any rigid universalistic approach to human rights that categorically ignores cultural differences. Silvia Staub-Bernasconi (2010), for instance, has criticised both “*hegemonial* universalism and *fundamentalist* pluralism” (10, emphasis in the original) and suggested, instead, a ‘moderate conception’ of universalism and pluralism. Openness to pluralism is also reinforced by the so-called indigenous social

work that advocates diversity in social work practice (Hart, 2015, 807). Finally, having grown “from a modernist, materialist perspective” (Campbell & Baikie, 2012, 72), critical social work has recently witnessed, as an impact of the post-secular society, the previously mentioned spiritual turn (Crisp, 2017; Damianakis, 2006; Graham et al., 2006; McKernan, 2005).

By being open to such a critical perspective, Islamic social work could broaden its spectrum of voices and diverse perspectives. Conversely, the approach of critical social work also offers a space for ‘mainstream’ approaches to allow exponents of Islamic social work to participate in debates. A critical stance towards power relations would sensitise Islamic social work to structural causes of marginalisation. From such a theoretical viewpoint, it could then resist tendencies to either individualise or culturalise conditions of distress and deprivation in the lives of Muslim service users and explore, instead, possibilities of empowerment and cross-religious, as well as cross-cultural, solidarities. Reflecting on gendered power relations would make it receptive to intellectual debates on Muslim feminism, as furthered by the works of scholars such as Amina Wadud, Leila Ahmed, Asma Barlas, Fatima Mernissi, and many more (Badran, 2009; Sirri, 2021). A postcolonial approach would render Islamic social work open to critical and historically informed perspectives on North-South relations and on the lingering effects of colonialism upon the current status of Muslim communities. Postmodernist philosophical thinking would give Islamic social work the theoretical foundation to withstand the paternalistic attitude of modernist intellectuals and policy-makers. The concept of post-secular society could reinvigorate Islamic social work’s religious orientation and reinforce that a Muslim can retain his or her religious belief and allegiance without compromising his or her integration into a modern secular state. Finally, the notion of social work as a human-rights profession would open Islamic social work to the works of contemporary Muslim scholars who have tried to deliver arguments for the congruence of Islam with human rights (e. g. An-Na’im, 1995; Bassiouni, 2014; Sachedina, 2009), not to mention the more general reformist interpretations of the Qur’an that could loosely be labelled as “humanistic hermeneutics” (Abū Zayd, 2004).

The issues discussed thus far show that Islamic social work is a multi-faceted phenomenon subject to a myriad of influences, including the motivations and self-interpretations of Muslim protagonists, external perceptions of these people, characteristics of the welfare state, and interactions and connections between state, civil society and religious actors. As such, it requires multi-dimensional exploration in different contexts and from the perspective of different disciplines. Conversely, it is also a matter of challenging social work in general from the prism of discussions about Islamic social work. A crucial aspect of this critical stance would be to move the role of Western social workers away from a hegemonic approach and convince them to focus instead on accompanying communities and promoting their strengths and resources (Beck et al., 2017, 69).

Contributions to this Volume

This volume brings together a collection of empirical studies, as well as conceptual and theoretical contributions. It is structured in three sections, each with a distinctive focus and approach:

Part I covers *Target Groups and Contexts of Islamic Social Work*. As any theological and ethical reflection is context-bound and results from requirements and experiences on the ground, an empirical section constitutes the starting-point of the volume. Social work consists of interactions between service providers and service users. As previously described, looking at Muslims as the target groups of social work was initially an important impulse for raising awareness for spirituality and religion. It therefore seems obvious to start with a focus on target groups. There are examples from the most vulnerable parts of the population: children, prisoners, the homeless, and disadvantaged youth. However, an examination of interactions at the micro level would not be sufficient, for these are embedded in a broader context. Given the growing perception of Muslim communities as protagonists in both informal and professional social work, this aspect must also be taken into account. Moreover, despite all tendencies to formulate international standards, social work remains highly contextual. This is particularly the case when it comes to cultural and religion-related issues, because the specific underlying conditions of integration and social cohesion, the way the welfare system is organised between the state and non-governmental organisations, and the relationship between the state and religious communities together form a unique constellation. From a methodological point of view, addressing target groups and contexts requires an empirical approach, which largely underlies the contributions in this section. The starting point is thus to look at Islamic social work from the vantage point of specific cases rather than exploring it as a general concept.

Baptiste Brodard (chapter “[Helping Muslims or Contributing to Society? Insights into the Paradoxes of Islamic Social Work for the Excluded](#)”) looks at Islamic social work for prisoners, the homeless and the disadvantaged youth, thereby discussing the tension between neutrality and community orientation. Whereas this chapter focuses on associations and projects that pursue a specific social purpose, *Lamia Irfan*’s article (chapter “[The Religious Community: A Space that Facilitates Successful Resettlement for Muslim Offenders](#)”) concentrates on existing religious communities, by analysing the contribution of mosques to the rehabilitation of Muslim offenders by providing them with resources and social relationships. This kind of intervention can be seen as an example of informal social work. The following three chapters look at the impact of three different national contexts on Islamic social work: the contribution by *Daniel Verba and Faïza Guélamine* (chapter “[Secularism, Social Work and Muslim Minorities in France](#)”) focuses on the French context, which officially excludes religion from the public sphere. As the authors show, the issue of Islam comes into the spotlight through religious references made by service users and social workers, as well as in the interaction between official social work and unofficial community involvement. *Sariya*

Cheruvallil-Contractor, *Alison Halford* and *Mphatso Boti Phiri* (chapter “[Identity, Intersectionality and Children in Care: The Case of Muslim-Heritage ‘Looked-After’ Children in the UK](#)”) deal with the placement of what they call “Muslim-heritage Children” in the British care system and show the complexities regarding their life circumstances and identities. *Hansjörg Schmid* (chapter “[Islamic Social Work Within the Framework of the Welfare System: Observations from the German Case](#)”) analyses the German context, which is open to the involvement of religion in the public sphere, focusing on the impact the welfare state has on this involvement. The chapter demonstrates that welfare regimes strongly influence the social work framework and the possibilities of developing Islamic social work.

Part II covers *Theological and Ethical Discourses on Islamic Social Work*. The starting point here is the basic observation that social work, as with any other form of social action, is motivated and shaped by ideas, especially when religious entities are involved. Consequently, reflection on Islamic social work and on the activities of faith-based organisations (FBOs) requires an analysis of underlying social thought. In a pluralistic post-secular society, however, these ideas are also topics of public debate. While general ethical reflection cannot limit itself to universal standards, an internal religious discussion of these questions as public theology must also consider the horizons of society as a whole and be responsive to a sceptical, if not critical, public. Following this logic, the contributions in Part II refer to theological and ethical questions, by looking at the potential and limitations of different normative discourses that legitimise Islamic social work. Although social work is not a classical subject of Islamic theology, it nonetheless requires theological discussion, as it involves the fundamental positioning of Islam in the context of pluralism and secularity. Moreover, such a discussion could contribute to a continuation and an opening up of classical discourses to new contexts and life conditions. It is therefore a matter of theological reflection (a) on the new field of Muslim communities, and (b) on how to locate this reflection within a broader societal framework. Against this background, the contributions in this section take a theoretical and reflective approach, while drawing on contexts, empirical experience and analysis as “epistemic weight” to further develop the normative discussion.

The very first contribution by *Dilwar Hussain* (chapter “[Islamic Social Ethics, Social Work and the Common Good: Learning from Western Contexts](#)”) highlights the contributions of Muslim protagonists to the whole of society and explores a range of possible classical and modern legitimations of Islamic social work in Western contexts. *Serdar Kurnaz* (chapter “[The *maqāsid-cum-maṣlaḥa* Approach as Theological Basis for Islamic Social Work: A Critical Analysis and an Alternative Proposal](#)”) critically discusses the *maṣlaḥa*-approach and uses *maʿrūf* as a tool to integrate human experience, by going beyond a merely textual approach. *Tarek Badawia* (chapter “[Islamic Practical Theology: *waqf* and *zakāt* as Theological Foundations](#)”) explores the potential of *waqf* and *zakāt* for Islamic practical theology, considering Islamic social work as an integral part thereof. Two further contributions go beyond theology to also integrate philosophical or interreligious perspectives: *Nazila Isgandarova* (chapter “[An “Epistemic Weight” of Islamic Practical Theology in Contemporary Islamic Social Work](#)”) draws on inspirations

from Christian practical theology to explore new ways of theorising Islamic practical theology generally and Islamic social work particularly. *Abdullah Sahin* (chapter “[Islam, Social Work and Common Good in the Muslim Minority Context of Europe: Rethinking Shari‘a as Relational Ethics](#)”) understands Shari‘a as relational ethics and thus as a basis for Islamic social work. Therefore, he discusses from a philosophical and theological perspective the Islamic guidelines that would encourage Muslim communities to engage with contemporary European societies in order to contribute to the common good.

Part III discusses *Perspectives and Contributions to Alternative Social Work*. As already shown, one option for Islamic social work moving ahead would be to go beyond conventional models, to develop an *alternative* form of social work, by adopting a stance that would be closer to *critical* rather than *mainstream* social work. By doing so, Islamic social work would not only be relevant to Muslim providers, it would also enter into a constructive dialogue with social work in general. This would enable Islamic concepts to be integrated into broader concepts of social work. The path towards such a scenario has already been paved by the rising consciousness of religious and community-based approaches, which have challenged a universalist approach to social work. The basic idea here is that Islamic social work does not have to reinvent the wheel by starting where mainstream social work began taking its first steps in the late nineteenth century but could rather learn from its failures as well as its advances. Adopting a critical stance would help Islamic social work to avoid the misconceptions and missteps of mainstream Western social work. It would also provide Islamic social work with theoretical rigour in confronting the paternalistic or assimilationist tendencies in modernist social work trends. By bringing insights and experiences from a variety of Muslim majority contexts with different intellectual, theological and ethical traditions and merging these with the latest achievements of modern social work, concepts that are both culturally and religiously informed and emancipative can be developed. The contributions in this section discuss various aspects of such an alternative path and illustrate, from different perspectives that social work with Muslim clients, be it carried out by Muslims or non-Muslims, has to adopt approaches that are not necessarily included in the toolkit of mainstream social work.

Rojan Afrouz and Beth Crisp (chapter “[Anti-oppressive Practice in Social Work with Women Wearing Hijab](#)”) focus on the conflictual topic of wearing *hijab* and discuss this issue in the context of anti-oppressive social work. This approach is comprised of a dialogue between different sets of values of social work agencies and their service users. *Jussra Schröer and Birsan Ürek* (chapter “[Social Work and Muslim Welfare: A Women’s Grassroots Association](#)”) present the case of a welfare provider which has been built up by Muslim women and addresses family issues. As a community initiative, it has gained full recognition and become part of a secular umbrella social work association. *Somaya Abdullah* (chapter “[The Role of tawba \(Repentance\) in Social Work with Muslim Clients](#)”) explores the relevance of the Islamic concept of *tawba* (repentance) for social work and argues that it has considerable potential to motivate Muslims to reset their lives, as it helps them to achieve a new way of being in relation to others and to God. This reflects the use of Islamic

concepts in social work in an exemplary manner. *Sara Ashencaen Crabtree* (chapter “[Islamic Principles, Inclusivity and Revitalisation in Conceptual Frameworks for Western Social Work](#)”) suggests that Islamic concepts and practices could go beyond the boundaries of Muslim communities to transform social work into a more nuanced, inclusive profession. In doing so, she draws on four terms with Islamic connotations and shows how a critical approach to social work can learn from such traditions. Finally, *Hansjörg Schmid and Amir Sheikhzadegan* (chapter “[Quo Vadis, Islamic Social Work? Empirical Findings and Theoretical Reflections Converging Towards an Alternative Approach](#)”) look at convergences between empirical findings and theoretical reflections in the previous chapters, draw out some cross-references, and critically discuss the attributions linked to the term ‘Islamic social work’.

The overall structure illustrates our approach to exploring Islamic social work as a range of phenomena: starting with empirical analyses which are sensitive to contextual and country-specific factors; moving on to theological and ethical reflections which try to link traditional discourse and contemporary thought; then locating the phenomena and reflections again within a broader general framework of social work with an outlook on alternative approaches. This broader perspective can enrich both the discussion of concrete cases and theological and ethical reflection. In this way, the three steps taken can be seen as a hermeneutical circle which must continue. In view of the limitations on certain examples and discourses, which are central to the discussion but inevitably cannot cover everything, this exploration of Islamic social work also acts as an invitation to think further.

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