

# A Response to Public Discourse? Intracultural Islamic Social Work in a Plural Society

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In recent years there has been a shift in research: whereas the intercultural opening of mainstream social work has been discussed since the 1980s, during the last 15 years social services provided by migrant organisations have gained increasing attention (Kofman 2016). Among them, Muslim organisations have been singled out, due to general debates about Islam, religious politics and integration. A central finding has been that these organisations not only provide religious but multiple services in the field of youth work, consultation or services for women and elderly people (Banfi 2014; Nagel 2016). It is often disputed whether these activities primarily serve community-oriented, or even proselytic interests, or if they can be pathways for participation and integration. This has an impact on possible state support, which in many cases requires a scope beyond a mere internal role within the communities.

Against this background, and in order to study the interface between Muslim religion and the welfare system, it is necessary to consider and combine different topics, disciplines and perspectives: *firstly*, the openness of the welfare system to religious dimensions in a historical and structural perspective has to be analysed (Gabriel et al. 2013), since the way it has been shaped by religious ideas and protagonists strongly influences today's capacity to include new religious bodies. *Secondly*, the governance of Islam as a minority religion within plural society has to be considered (Gianni 2016; Hernández Aguilar 2018). Both

these issues affect the field of study and are closely linked to each other, as the shape of the welfare system determines the possibilities of political measures in this area. *Thirdly*, the dynamics of Muslim self-organisation have to be examined, depending in this context on individual motivations, ideological backgrounds and local interactions.

Despite transnational trends and developments, these fields are highly country-specific. This paper refers to the Swiss context. In a three-step process corresponding to the points outlined above, it explores the case of a Muslim service-provider and the framework surrounding it, through an ethnographic study (Brodard 2019). In a fourth step, this will be linked to a specific concept within social work, providing a conceptual basis. The description and analysis of the case – as in other case-based studies on welfare (e.g. Bäckström et al. 2011) – is intended to contribute to the unfolding dynamics between political and religious bodies in the Swiss welfare system, which are confronted with religious pluralism. However, parallels to this case can also be found in other countries.

## The Swiss Welfare System and the Place of Muslim Service Providers

The historical development of the welfare state creates a certain path-dependency which also impacts on the inclusion of Muslim welfare. The Swiss welfare state is generally considered a mixture of liberal and conservative types (Obinger et al. 2010), which devel-

oped a system of social insurances on a national level relatively late, compared to other Western European countries. This is mainly due to a high degree of federalism, decentralisation and direct democracy. In the history of the Swiss welfare state, laic liberals played an important role, which is also reflected by the majority they held in the national government from 1848 until 1943 (Obinger 2009: 177-181). This led to a high degree of individual responsibility and relatively low social expenditure compared with other countries (Mäder 2014). Social security has been mainly provided on a local level, by company heads or philanthropic initiatives. The Swiss welfare state is therefore characterised by a plurality of public and private service providers within a “welfare-mix” (Canonica 2019). However, economisation tendencies have brought about a strongly competitive “quasi-market” (Engler 2015: 220), which makes accessing the welfare arena highly demanding for service providers.

Confessional divisions and conflicts between Roman Catholics and Protestants, with their diverging views on the welfare state, have strongly marked how it has developed in Switzerland (Obinger 2009). Still today, Church-state relations are organised on a cantonal level and there is often a strong presence of the majority denomination. In some cantons, the recognition of religious communities under public law entails financial support, which is given to services relevant for society from the viewpoint of social utility (Engi 2018). However, depending on the canton, only the Roman Catholic, Reformed churches and the Jewish community have acquired this status. Faith-based service providers like Caritas, founded in 1901, or the Protestant equivalent (HEKS), established in 1946, play an important role within the Swiss welfare state (Fix 2005), through their advocacy for the poor for example, however they have not become providers of a large number of social, educational or health facilities, unlike in other countries (Knöpfel 2018: 135). In contrast to

the German system, they do not benefit from financial privileges and are dependent on asserting themselves as project providers in competitive tendering procedures. There is a national Jewish welfare organisation which was founded in 1908 and which owes its importance to its role in receiving refugees during the Second World War. Furthermore, there are services provided by Free Protestant Churches such as the Salvation Army. It can be said that the relief organisations of the major churches, at least, have undergone a process of self-secularisation and growing independence so that their faith-orientation is less explicitly visible.

Although Muslims aged over 15 represent 5.5 % of the Swiss population, welfare activities of Muslim providers have so far attracted very little attention. Often these are voluntary services, which are in most cases not yet part of networks of service-providers. Whereas welfare activities of the churches are mainly seen as positive (Manuel/Glatzer 2019: 5), this is not necessarily the case for Muslim service providers, because they are either unknown in wider society or considered to only be internal to the community. The area of integration may provide some opportunities to support these providers, but in Switzerland the focus is more on individual integration with an assimilationist orientation and less on support of community-oriented projects (Gianni 2016).

To summarise, although the Swiss religious organisations still play a role in the Swiss welfare state, there is little room for Muslim providers. In addition, there is relatively little support from the state, with limited resources on their side. For these reasons, Muslim providers in Switzerland have hardly achieved any visibility in the field of welfare services.

### **De-radicalisation Politics and Public Discourse**

Outside of the complex religious politics mainly falling under cantonal competence, radicalisation and its prevention, which is

regulated on a federal level, will be discussed here. The key aspect of this issue is a collaborative approach between the state and Muslim organisations (Schmid et al. 2018) but can also be seen as a sign of the conflictual character of religious politics in Switzerland (Liedhegener 2016: 300). The significant role of radicalisation and its prevention is reflected in public discourse, in which by contrast the topic of social welfare hardly plays a role: whereas between 2009 and 2013, visibility through religious signs was the major issue in certain Swiss print media in the coverage of Islam, between 2014 and 2017, terrorism, together with radicalisation, have become the key issues (Ettinger 2018: 14). This has been accompanied by the growth of more distance-generating reporting (15).

Public discourse provokes political measures and obliges Muslims to react to suspicions concerning radicalisation; this is understood as a process leading to violent action linked with radical ideologies (Khosrokhavar 2014: 7–8). Thereby the radicalisation discourse functions as a control mechanism: through it, a boundary against a radical and illiberal counter-image is drawn (Hegemann 2019: 55). Muslims are therefore obliged to respond to the issues and suspicions raised in public discourse. In this logic, preventive measures against radicalisation can serve to prove the reliability of certain Muslim actors, who place themselves on the ‘good’ side within society. This offers a certain possibility of ‘rehabilitating’ oneself from collective suspicions. On a larger scale, many activities of Muslim organisations in Switzerland can be seen as preventive, including participation in committees or publication of declarations against violence (Merz/Farman 2017).

The political debate on radicalisation has led to the creation of several working groups. The cantons, cities and communes under the leadership of the Swiss Security Network (SSN) Delegate jointly elaborated the “National Action Plan to Prevent and Counter Radicalisation and Violent Extremism”, published in 2017.

This document is focused on radicalisation and extremism in a broader sense but considers jihadist radicalisation as the “main threat” (Swiss Security Network 2017: 5). There are 26 possible prevention measures listed. One measure focuses on “institutionalised cooperation between the state and migrants’ associations, sports clubs, youth clubs and women’s clubs, experts, charities and religious organisations” (17). Welfare activities play an important role, but other classical fields of religious politics, such as chaplaincy in public institutions, religious education and interreligious dialogue are also included in the measures. In this manner, radicalisation serves as a key narrative linking different fields of action and emphasizing the urgency it gives to measures which concern Muslim organisations.

One result of the National Plan was the provision of 5 million Swiss Francs for programmes implementing the different measures, providing an opportunity for support of social activities. So far, two projects by Muslim carrier organisations have been chosen for this programme: in 2019, the pioneering Tasamouh project situated in Biel/Bienne near Berne, which will be examined hereafter as a case, and in 2020, a project by the Muslim umbrella organisation UVAM in the Canton of Vaud, which is yet to commence.

### **Case-Study: Tasamouh**

Tasamouh is a pioneering Muslim community association which aims to tackle radicalisation linked to Islam in the bilingual town of Biel/Bienne, often considered as a hot spot of ‘radicalisation’. Indeed, despite its moderate size, the 55,000 inhabitant town is well-known for its cultural diversity and its significant Muslim population of close to 10 %. Moreover, Biel was affected by the departure of young Muslims to *jihad* zones in the aftermath of the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris. In response to this situation, a Muslim immigrant woman decided to set up an initiative “from within the community” to prevent radicalisation and to tackle identity-based issues

among Muslim youth. The Tasamouh project was launched in 2016 and started with a one-year training course for thirteen “interfaith mediators”, who were supposed to commit to preventing radicalisation. Two years later, Tasamouh officially became an independent association. It now represents one of the major projects within Islamic social work in Switzerland (Brodard, 2019), even though its label as a “Muslim association” is subject of controversy among its members.

Tasamouh’s transition from a project to an association indicates the important increase in its activities, which fall into two main fields. Firstly, Tasamouh provides youths and their families with counselling and mediation. This street social work reaches people who often avoid the statutory social work agencies and who are therefore difficult for social workers to reach. Tasamouh’s members meet people specifically according to their needs, helping them to tackle issues including mental health problems, family disorders, addictions or violent behaviour. In these cases, the link with radicalisation is often not obvious. Secondly, the association is involved in public events with other civil society organisations or public institutions. The aim here is to promote social cohesion and to tackle issues such as racism or hostility towards Muslims. To do so, Tasamouh engages in various intercultural and interreligious events at a local and regional level. It also organizes workshops in public schools and visits to mosques and synagogues. The intention is to build bridges between cultures and religions in order to defuse identity conflicts.

Despite its broad missions, Tasamouh is mostly seen as an association specifically dedicated to countering radicalisation. If at first this label was accepted and valued by its representatives, they have subsequently fought to embody a wider social work identity. Its founder highlights the fact that radicalisation remains only one part of its activism and explains that there are other underlying social issues:

Our first enemy is drugs, not radicalisation. We’ve already lost three or four young people in the community because of that!

In this regard, Tasamouh’s members assume that radicalising behaviour often covers up wider social and psychological distress. Indeed, several young people looked after by Tasamouh confess having used hate speech-supporting terrorist narratives to provoke and rebel. In this sense, Tasamouh’s founder contends that so-called cases of radicalisation would have been considered as mere social problems ten years earlier, whereas the current international context has led to a higher stigmatisation of Muslims who, if showing deviant behaviour, are likely to be suspected of radicalisation. However, Tasamouh has taken advantage of this trend by defining itself as a specialist in the prevention of radicalisation. It has established a solid reputation far beyond Biel, which has led to numerous partnerships with the state and civil society. Additionally, the film “Naïma” (Milosevic 2019) has highlighted the association’s work and diffused it on a national level.

Most of Tasamouh’s beneficiaries are young people of North African origin who face identity-related issues and experience social and family crises. In addition, they often question their relationship to religion. Although most of them do not practice Islam, they have ambivalent links with religious discourse at the risk of excluding others, as noted by the founder of the association:

Eighty per cent of the young people we know live like this: they are very strict on *ḥalāl*, *ḥarām*, but they do the opposite. They are very strict with their sisters, who are expected to be very good practicing Muslims. But they have a completely contradictory life: they drink, they behave badly, they do anything wrong.

An intracultural approach can contribute to meeting the needs and specificities of this public. On one hand, it allows issues of identity, culture and religion to be explored, each

in their diversity. For example, the intolerant attitudes of some beneficiaries can be deconstructed by religious counter-narratives. On the other hand, there is a proximity between the organisation and the beneficiaries, with shared elements of cultural, ethnic, and religious identities. Additionally, confidentiality and the protection of people underpin the trust of the recipients, conversely to mainstream social work agencies where anonymity is limited.

Based on these factors, the association claims an added value in social work on which it relies for funding requests. Since its very beginnings, Tasamouh has benefitted from various partnerships, both from statutory institutions and civil society organisations. For instance, the initial one-year training course for interreligious mediators was funded by private and public institutions, including the municipality of Biel. Since then, most activities have been supported by the Swiss government, as well as local Protestant and Catholic organisations. Tasamouh does not rely on community-based donations and partnerships with other Muslim associations remain very limited.

Finally, Tasamouh's identity remains hybrid. It values its inclusion in civil society and claims to be "not a religious but a social work organization" referring to the religious and cultural diversity among its proponents. It also highlights an intracultural approach, based on Islamic knowledge and the ethnocultural backgrounds of its members. The latter is emphasized as an added-value, which tends to explain the success of the association and the rise of its partnerships among civil society organisations and statutory agencies.

### **An Intracultural Approach to Social Work**

Tasamouh promotes an intracultural approach to social work, referring to the intra-ethnic concept mentioned by Jovelin (2002). This implies a mode of intervention that promotes the mobilization of social workers who share common ethnic identities

with the beneficiaries. Whereas Jovelin remains sceptical of this approach, Tasamouh asserts that it improves the understanding of cultural and identity-based issues and therefore allows them to be tackled more efficiently. In Anglo-Saxon contexts, intracultural approaches have benefitted from a greater legitimacy in social work (Shulman 2016: XXXII). Common elements of cultural background between practitioners and clients can lead to a more efficient intervention, even if they do involve some risks (Yan 2008: 324). In addition, social work of this type is likely to incorporate religious and spiritual concerns in its intervention (Loue 2017: 23-24), which is facilitated by a shared religious belonging between social workers and their recipients. At the least, practitioners are expected to understand beneficiaries' cultures and faith (Ashencaen Crabtree et al. 2008). It is indispensable not to homogenise and essentialise culture in the intracultural approach, but to perceive it in its diversity, however without completely dissolving cultural differences (Lang et al. 2019, 368-369). In the case of Tasamouh, only a few protagonists share cultural and religious features that echo those of the beneficiaries, while the association as a whole promotes added intracultural value. This highlights the limits of this concept and shows how a constructed and displayed identity can enhance funding opportunities in the current context.

If the Anglo-Saxon context provides fertile ground for the development of an intracultural approach to social work, it remains more controversial in French-speaking countries in Europe. However, some similar approaches have been implemented by statutory social agencies in France, despite their seeming contradiction with Republican values (Billion 2008; Boucher 2012). An example is the "Grands Frères" [Big Brothers] who were community social workers hired on the bases of their ethnic and sociocultural backgrounds (Duret 1996). Their intracultural approach was aimed at cultural mediation and pacifica-

tion in tough urban areas. This illustrates that intracultural approaches can be promoted for pragmatic interest and needs, including within highly secular socio-political systems which one would expect to be opposed to them.

Whereas French-speaking cantons of Switzerland often share similar views of social work, the federal system allows more flexibility in its policies. In Neuchâtel, a mentorship programme engages community counselors who share common elements of cultural identities with the target groups (CICM/COSM 2017: 27). However, it is only with the rise of the radicalisation and counter-extremism programme that the intracultural approach has gained legitimacy. The SSN therefore acknowledges the added-value of this approach:

Specialists who are themselves migrants (second generation) are now recognised as a very valuable resource for the social services. Their knowledge of Islamic values, culture and religion and their contact with Muslim communities help to prevent radicalisation. (Swiss Security Network 2016: 17)

Consequently, Muslim representatives need to be integrated in the process of preventing radicalisation, because counter discourses to tackle terrorist organisations' narratives require religious knowledge of and proximity to Muslim communities. De-radicalisation therefore opens opportunities for Muslim organisations to participate in social work and its public financing. The reverse side, however, is that the focus on radicalisation reinforces an unbalanced image of Islam: one which is determined from the outside and which only allows Muslims to make a contribution in a narrowly defined area.

## Conclusions

Current needs in the field of prevention and de-radicalisation have reinforced public acknowledgement of religious and cultural skills within social intervention. Tasamouh benefitted directly from this new trend, as it

proposed original solutions based on community approaches and the identity-based skills of its members. Beyond the field of radicalisation prevention, the intracultural approach in social work can be seen as a tool to approach issues of integration and cultural diversity, especially by reaching out to beneficiary groups, who might otherwise be more suspicious towards public institutions. However, while intracultural practice may be helpful in the "therapeutic alliance" between the social worker and the client, aside from culture, aspects of diversity within cultural groups and other dimensions such as class or gender also have to be considered (Shulman 2016: 54, 87).

An international analogy can be seen in the field of refugee work by Muslim organisations in Germany, especially since 2015, which have more recently been significantly supported by the state (Ceylan/Charchira 2019). In France, Islamic social work organisations, which have been extensively developed for a decade, address various social issues related to exclusion in predominantly Muslim neighbourhoods (Barylo 2017). However, in contrast to those in Switzerland and Germany, they still fail to obtain public recognition and funding.

The field of intracultural social work concerned with preventing radicalisation opens a door for Muslim welfare providers. Whether this will remain limited to this specific field or allow for still further development, e.g. in the field of family counselling (Yanik-Şenay 2018), cannot yet be foreseen. Although the agenda has mainly been set by public discourse and political measures, the Tasamouh case also shows the agency and scope of individual pioneers. Governance in this respect does not only mean dominance and outside control, but also support for bottom-up activities in favourable local constellations. It is an expression of a broader negotiation process between the state and civil society, including religious bodies, which is characteristic of welfare system dynamics.

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