Quo Vadis, Islamic Social Work? Empirical Findings and Theoretical Reflections Converging towards an Alternative Approach

Hansjörg Schmid and Amir Sheikhzadegan

Abstract This final chapter attempts to associate, structure and summarise the principal insights of the contributions to "Exploring Islamic Social Work. Between Community and the Common Good". Despite differences in their topics and the contexts they treat, the methods applied and angles adopted, all the chapters have a common focus on Muslims as protagonists, both in the field of Islamic social work, and the Islamic thinking around it. The volume's topic itself is embedded in a new social work scholarly debate, stimulated by the re-emergence of social work's religious roots in the context of post-secular society. This chapter reviews Islamic social work as an empirical phenomenon, discusses various theological and ethical approaches, again takes up the debate on the common good and examines Islamic social work as alternative social work. Finally, the question of what exactly Islamic social work consists of and the challenges which arise in connection with the 'Islamic' attribution are addressed. In this way, both insights and open questions, as well as directions for further research on Islamic social work, are identified within the framework of different research discourses.

Keywords Islamic social work · Islamic ethics · Islamic theology · Alternative social work · Common good · Muslim communities

The volume "Exploring Islamic Social Work. Between Community and the Common Good" is an attempt to explore a wide range of social work practices, reflection and programming across different Western contexts. What links the various contributions is their focus on Muslims, as protagonists in this field, on the one hand, and relevant Islamic thought, on the other. The topic is embedded in a new general

H. Schmid (✉)
Swiss Center for Islam and Society, University of Fribourg, Fribourg, Switzerland
e-mail: hansjoerg.schmid@unifr.ch

A. Sheikhzadegan
Department of Social Work, Social Policy and Global Development, University of Fribourg, Fribourg, Switzerland

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H. Schmid, A. Sheikhzadegan (eds.), *Exploring Islamic Social Work*, Muslims in Global Societies Series 9, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-95880-0_16

debate in social work, as the religious roots of the latter come to the fore again, albeit in a different way and form: social work is now faced with the challenge of situating itself at the interface of the secular and religious-spiritual spheres, which are often less divided than it may appear.

This final chapter takes on the task of structuring, discussing and evaluating the results of the various preceding chapters. The focus is on cross-connections and correlations between the contributions, on discussing them critically and on thinking further about the issues they pursue. In accordance with the different parts of the volume and the different approaches to Islamic social work, the present contribution does not do this in a uniform way, but chooses a path appropriate to each approach and each issue in question. Typologies play an important role here, i. e. that of assigning service-providing FBOs, country contexts and theological-ethical positions to different types in order to reach a more general level of discussion. Another aim of the chapter is to bring contributions with similar approaches into dialogue, while relating different groups of contributions to each other in varying fashions. The aim is to show how empirical and theoretical approaches from different disciplines can be productively combined. Finally, enquiries and critical discussions of the contributions serve to point out where further research is needed.

This chapter will first look at Islamic social work as an empirical phenomenon relating both to the empirical contributions in part I of the volume and to contextual aspects in further contributions. This is followed by a discussion of various theological and ethical approaches with a focus on part II. Then Islamic social work and the common good in Western, plural and secularised contexts as a transversal question in both empirical and theoretical chapters will be scrutinised, before Islamic social work as alternative social work is discussed, mainly in relation to part III of the volume. Finally, the overarching question of exactly what Islamic social work consists of and what challenges arise in connection with the 'Islamic' attribution of the term will be addressed.

In this way, five central aspects of Islamic social work are addressed in the present chapter: its multifaceted, practical implementation by different actors, for different target groups and in different contexts; its theological-ethical foundation as embedded in traditional Islamic discourses, as well as in relation to current interdisciplinary reflections; its concrete and programmatic reference to the universal common good and the openness of the latter to religious-cultural particularities; its location in the professional and disciplinary framework of a social work critical of its own norms and open to new approaches; finally, its self-reflexive questioning of the Islamic profile with regard to its proprium on the one hand and its ability to integrate into the framework of broader social work on the other. This indicates various cornerstones for the directions in which Islamic social work can develop further. However, it also becomes clear that in a relational sense the issue is also the profile of plural societies and their respective approaches to social work.

Islamic Social Work as an Empirical Phenomenon

The various contributions, especially in the first part of this volume, help to define the subject of Islamic social work more precisely. Some major characteristics and challenges of Islamic social work are discussed here:

In most cases, Islamic social work has its origins in "self-help" (Schmid, 2022, 100) or "intracultural social work" (Brodard, 2022, 36) addressing the specific needs of Muslims – be it youth, women, families or detainees. Islamic social work thus responds to a demand for a sensitive offer in which providers and beneficiaries are both of a similar cultural and religious background (Schröer & Ürek, 2022, 226). While some contributions refer to clearly professional social work recognised by the state (Schröer & Ürek, 2022), others include informal non-professional social work in mosques, associations and other types of communities (Brodard, 2022; Irfan, 2022). Brodard speaks of "informal 'social workers'" (2022, 29) who assume a social work function without having a corresponding mandate or the required qualifications. Hussain also wants to understand social work in a wider sense as "social action and activity in the engagement of social and charitable good in society" (2022, 121–122). These activities are in many cases linked with religious communities. Thus, Irfan shows that Muslim communities function as a "moral community" (2022, 55) and as such can provide both tangible and intangible support for their members. By engendering respect for law and strengthening a positive new identity, they also encourage them to positively contribute to broader society (Irfan, 2022, 57–58) instead of seeing themselves as its victims (Irfan, 2022, 62). In this sense, communities and their informal social work and care (Whittaker 1986) indirectly promote the common good of society. Faith, spirituality and religious practice may also provide specific "faithful" or "religious capital" (Hussain, 2022, 123), complementing and strengthening the bonding and bridging social capital of religious communities.

However, this focus on community-based work poses several challenges: is there not a risk that the profile and quality standards of social work become weakened? Should there not be a greater distinction between the functions of religious communities on the one hand and professional social work on the other (Crisp, 2017, 376), even if in some cases social work can be provided by community members or within communities? How can such informal social work be linked with other formal services and incorporated into official systems? And how can it be guaranteed that communities truly respect individual choice and do not impose their norms on their members? This certainly requires an adherence to the principles of social work as defined by the International Federation of Social Workers: "The overarching principles of social work are respect for the inherent worth and dignity of human beings, doing no harm, respect for diversity and upholding human rights and social justice" (IFSW, 2014). In order to derive guidelines for practice, these principles require some further elaboration. To name but one example, Afrouz and Crisp (2022, 213–214) draw on Mapp et al. (2019), to underscore that respect for human dignity means respecting the individual's self-determination. This does not mean,

however, that the relational dimensions and the embeddedness of human existence highlighted by Sahin (2022, 184) can be ignored; nor can the fact that by being anchored in a community, human beings are never completely self-determined (Akbar, 2019). Islamic concepts and normative guidelines relevant to social work have both an individual and a collective dimension (Abdullah, 2022, 234). Regarding the latter, in an organisation for instance, space for self-determination would necessitate transparent differentiation between social and religious services in the sense of a "dual-focus" model (Unruh & Sider, 2005, 137), so that service-users are free to refrain from participating in religious offers.

A reference to the debate on Faith-Based-Organisations (FBOs) already mentioned in the introduction (Schmid & Sheikhzadegan, 2022, 9–11) may be helpful at this point: several contributions roughly represent some of the types in Unruh and Sider's typology of FBOs, although this attempt to classify complex individual cases also illustrates the fact that every typology is "inherently limited" (Unruh & Sider, 2005, 109). The Muslim welfare provider as described by Schröer and Ürek can be best classified as a faith-affiliated FBO which goes beyond the boundaries of a religious community. Irfan's case refers to mosques and the impact their services have on offenders; it can thus be seen as a faith-permeated organisation. The concept of *tawba* as discussed by Abdullah refers to the act of repentance which would in many cases require a religious authority's ruling. Therefore, the concept of *tawba* could be best applied in the context of either a faith-permeated or a faith-centred FBO. Referring to different cases, Brodard observes an "overlapping between religious services and social work" (2022, 38): the case of SASI in Geneva originating from a mosque and using its premises can best be characterised as a faith-centred FBO, *Secours Islamique France* (SIF), *Tasamouh* and Kumon Y'all as faith-affiliated FBOs. In the latter organisations, religiously motivated key protagonists stand in the foreground, with other staff and volunteers from outside the religious community playing minor roles, if any. It is noticeable that in this classification the category of faith-background FBOs is not represented. This may be related to the fact that currently, working with Muslim service users goes along with a strong emphasis on their identity profile, while over time some of the organisations may undergo an opening process, as has been the case with various Christian charities (Koehrsen & Heuser, 2020).

Different types of FBOs and the (non-professional) social work they provide are perceived differently in different countries. In each country, both the structure of its welfare state and its religious policy play a central role when it comes to a recognition of Muslim welfare as "a supplement and enrichment to already existing welfare systems" (Badawia, 2022, 163). While Western contexts share, in this regard, many experiences and challenges (Verba & Guélamine, 2022, 71), the specific impact of secularism on how FBOs are treated differs from one country to the other. The contributions in this volume refer to different national contexts. Sometimes, they provide a broader framework for reflection in a specific context, such as Canada (Isgandarova, 2022) or Australia (Afrouz & Crisp, 2022). In the first part, three

contributions take a more specific look at the country context they treat (France, Germany and Great Britain). In the French context, the secularisation of the profession of social work has been particularly marked. Consequently, they are easily destabilised through the affirmation of religion (Verba & Guélamine, 2022, 68). The case of Muslim-heritage children in the British context illustrates how important social workers' religious sensitivity is (Cheruvallil-Contractor et al., 2022). The German context, with a strong cooperative orientation in its welfare systems shows the possibility of state support which encourages and promotes Islamic social work and contributes to its integration (Schmid, 2022). Across these three cases, we see a high degree of variation which provides insights for a broader discussion. The separation and delegation of religion into the private sphere in France, the scope for the development of culture- and religion-based welfare services in the multicultural United Kingdom and the recognition of religious service providers as structured and controlled by the state in the German cooperation model represent three very different constellations for Islamic social work. Although it would be exciting and useful to include country contexts outside the Western world in the comparison (for an example, see Akimoto et al., 2016), these three context studies already present a considerable spectrum of possibilities for shaping Islamic social work within the framework of the welfare state.

In view of the growing criticism of country typologies in welfare research (Van Kersbergen, 2019), we stop short of labelling the country cases as 'types'. Likewise, authors who develop complex typologies of religious policy admit that there is a "significant variation" (Fox, 2018, 129) within the different categories. Moreover, each national context approach also has its limitations, stemming from internal diversity and a divide between theory and practice: Verba and Guélamine, for instance, show that different interpretations of secularism exist within France, even varying from one institution to another (2022, 75–76). Moreover, they have observed that social workers in France very often break away from the rigid secularism of their profession to practice "a form of reasonable compromise, based on the Canadian accommodations model" (Verba & Guélamine, 2022, 70). For instance, they might find out that wearing the veil "does not systematically correlate with gendered submission" (Verba & Guélamine, 2022, 74), but can also be interpreted as "a form of identity renewal, an emancipation from family and school, as a sign of generational belonging, for the sake of fashion, if on the matrimonial market and, of course, for social control" (Verba & Guélamine, 2022, 75). Similarly, in the UK and Germany, political and social debates about the shape of the welfare system are ongoing, with social work being as internally pluralistic as in France. It therefore seems obvious to consider country-specific contexts as only one factor among others and to conceptualise them in a more dynamic way when analysing cases and discussing Islamic social work. Moreover, the agency of the respective bodies and protagonists, as well as the underlying Islamic ideas and theological reflections also need to be adequately taken into account.

Providing Theological and Ethical Legitimation for Islamic Social Work

The practical examples of Islamic social work show that it arose from necessity in the field. However, theological reflection is also necessary when it comes to the religious legitimation of Islamic social work practice, as well as establishing a connection to social work as an academic discipline. For the time being, a contextualisation of Islamic social work “within Muslim tradition” (Sahin, 2022, 181) is still missing: five contributions in the second part of the volume address this challenge. These chapters have different methodological and content-related approaches and can be classified into five types of positions, with some tensions between each other, but which are still essentially complementary. The difference between textual and contextual approaches will be highlighted as one distinguishing element (Saeed, 2005, 3). Some contributions refer to the same concepts, such as *maqāṣid* (objectives of the Shariʿa) and *maṣlaḥa* (common good), but interpret and weigh them in different ways. All five contributions share the position that one should go beyond a narrow community-oriented framework to take the broader societal context into consideration.

Hussain undertakes a synthetic and contextual approach to Islamic social work, combining different schools and disciplines of Islamic thought and theology with contemporary social sciences. He refers to different positions of the teleological *maqāṣid*-approach, illustrating a spectrum of reformist and conservative interpretations. This approach can be understood as “a way for changes in the modern era to speak to their [the Muslims’, the authors] lived experience of Islam” (Hussain, 2022, 125). It is complemented by contemporary reformist approaches based on a holistic reading of the Qurʾan, often linked to contemporary political issues, and again brought into dialogue with Abraham Maslow’s conception of human needs. Such a dialogical setting is seen by Hussain as “an important opportunity for learning about new ways of understanding Islam” (2022, 135) in a pluralist Western context. He thereby emphasises the role of human reason and considers “ambiguity and subjectivity” (Hussain, 2022, 130) in interpretation as strengths to be rediscovered. Yet is there not a risk of constructing an anachronistic continuity when looking at the “origins of Islam” (Hussain, 2022, 131) and examples in the Prophet’s life (Hussain, 2022, 128)? How can a broad spectrum of cited positions be combined with each other? And is Maslow’s anthropocentric approach not also problematic in relation to “divine principles” (Hussain, 2022, 130), even if these are interpreted in a humanistic way?

Kurnaz proposes a theological legitimation of a contemporary approach to Islamic social work. He wants to avoid text-centredness as well as binary classification into ‘allowed’ and ‘forbidden’. Adopting an anthropological point of view, he bases his discussion on general human capabilities such as knowledge, reason and the capacity to find solutions, arguing that “different solutions to the same problem can co-exist” (Kurnaz, 2022, 143). By focussing on human needs as basis for social work, he argues against a compartmentalisation of religious affiliations. Referring

to Maslow, Kurnaz links human needs to the Qurʾanic concept of *al-maʿrūf,* which he considers as inclusive, flexible and open to diversity. He therefore speaks of the "open texture" (2022, 146) of the Qurʾan and its "room for ambiguity" (Kurnaz, 2022, 149). His approach is also teleological, in a sense of striving to achieve the most benefit for society. Kurnaz clearly practices a public theology approach (Schmid & Sheikhzadegan, 2022, 8) when linking secular and religious argumentation and formulating, as a double criterion, "adequacy to human experience, but also to Muslim tradition and principle" (Kurnaz, 2022, 148). He provides theological tools to legitimate Islamic social work while leaving space for contemporary concepts. He shows that social work can only be theologically legitimated and not substantiated. But can the contingent historico-critical approach he applies really provide a basis and starting point for reflection? Is there not a risk it will be yet another textual approach which proves the openness of the text?

Badawia's attempt to provide a fundament for Islamic social work can be characterised as a reinterpretative-textual approach. Unlike the other contributions, he includes both a textual and historical approach, looking at Islamic scholarship and models in history. The prophet himself functions as a "role-model" (Badawia, 2022, 168). He attempts to transfer guiding principles and concepts such as *zakāt* or *waqf* to a contemporary context. For Badawia, exegesis of the sources represents a tool for building up Islamic social work in the context of the modern welfare state. He attempts a reinterpretation by referring to "parallels between the historical context and the current context of establishing Muslim welfare care in modern societies" (Badawia, 2022, 159). One of his key approaches is interpreting the categories of recipients in Q 9:60, in order to update the notion of *zakāt* in relation to current contexts. A historical and textual approach is certainly necessary for a reflection on Islamic social work, especially if, as is the case with his approach, it is done in a hermeneutically reflected way. If one also examines the case studies presented in this volume, some of which see religious services and social work as very closely interlinked, referring to traditional concepts and normative texts undoubtedly proves to be important. But are the results of this reinterpretation really applicable to the requirements of the modern welfare state? Considering *zakāt* as a "vehicle for defining and asserting Muslim identity" (Kuran, 2019, 26), especially in the twentieth century, can a Qurʾanic approach deliver concrete and appropriate concepts for contemporary Western contexts?

Isgandarova addresses the interface of Islamic traditions and social work, with a focus on the individual. Like Kurnaz, she is critical of a too-normative approach: she emphasises the "epistemic weight" of human experience, aiming at a "shift from primarily text-based teaching into studies of the praxis of faith" (Isgandarova, 2022, 169). She relates a key concept of hers, the "living human document", to Islamic concepts like *tawḥīd* (oneness and unity of God) or *taqwā* (God-consciousness) (Isgandarova, 2022, 172). From this vantage point, she postulates a correlation between a client-centred approach in counselling and human-centred revelation, corresponding again to public theology. Whereas Kurnaz demonstrates an openness to such an approach from a theological perspective, Isgandarova instead

develops it further at an interdisciplinary interface, which is indispensable for a reflection on Islamic social work. But can a "living human document" be based on the same level as Scripture from a theological point of view (2022, 172)? Isgandarova also illustrates how a dialogue with Christian approaches can be helpful. Nonetheless, widespread pressure on Muslims in public discourse to adapt to Christian models is to be avoided (2022). How can Muslim and Christian approaches be brought into a fruitful dialogue on an equal footing? Are there ways to further integrate impulses from Christian authors into an Islamic frame of thought?

Sahin examines the interface of Islamic traditions and social work, with a focus on its social dimensions. He argues that the famous 'Medinah Pledge', which came into existence under the leadership of the prophet Muhammad (Sahin, 2022, 192), was based on the principles and values of inclusive, applied relational social ethics, delivering guidelines for Muslims' engagement with non-Muslims with the aim of serving the common good. He also reflects on the convergence of Shariʿa and relational ethics, while criticising a literalist reading of the Qurʾan and legal tradition in Islam. Referring to philosophers like Levinas, he emphasises the relational aspect in ethics and theology. By adopting a social-ethical perspective and referring to both theological traditions and contemporary philosophy, Sahin provides a theoretical foundation to bridge these two domains without falling into the trap of either Western hegemony or complete relativism. Still, the problematic of dealing with the Shariʿa as a highly burdened concept and the term minority, which is central to it, being understood as an expression of Muslim separation from broader society, remains. How can the focus on Shariʿa be linked to approaches from other theological disciplines also mentioned by Sahin, such as Qurʾanic interpretation or mysticism?

The five approaches discussed above illustrate the rich resources they draw upon. They all refer to Islamic terms and concepts, giving different weight to a text-centred approach. To varying degrees, they enter into a dialogue with contemporary philosophical, psychological and sociological positions, fundamentally emphasising a convergence with the Muslim framework of thought. However, the open questions posed in each case also show that this discussion needs to be continued. Sometimes the complex theological and ethical debate is only very selectively and one-sidedly perceived at grassroots level (Hussain, 2022, 128). There is still a need for dialogue between these different levels so that they can be brought together in the most productive way.

Beyond these five approaches, further directions could be considered. For example, liberation theological approaches, with their strong structural orientation, can offer helpful starting points for social work (Schmid, 2022, 112). Finally, the five contributions mentioned above, refer, in varying degrees, to social work and corresponding social scientific concepts. While practitioners are often relatively unfamiliar with theological and ethical backgrounds, not all thinkers represented here are equally acquainted with the practical field and the theoretical foundation of social work. This partly shows the limitations of the respective perspectives: an even more interdisciplinary approach drawing on theology, ethics, social work and social sciences is desirable in the future.

Islamic Social Work and the Common Good in Western Contexts

The question of the common good is situated at the interface of the two preceding sections on empirical and theological perspectives. Already an issue of interest in Greek philosophy and throughout Western intellectual history ever since, the concept has also been a major topic in contemporary political philosophy, for instance in the so-called "liberal-communitarian debate" of the 1980s. Scholars have debated questions such as who defines the common good (Hazelkorn & Gibson, 2019), or "what the common good entails, how it should be balanced against individual goods, and if and by whom it should be enforced" (Etzioni, 2015, 1). One core issue in the debate is whether individual rights should take primacy over the common good or the other way around. While the advocates of individual rights are generally sceptical of the concept of the common good, with some even going so far as to regard the common good as a threat to individual and minority rights, others have argued that neglecting the common good would ultimately destroy the very social fabric that enables a fostering of individual freedom in the first place (see, for example, Etzioni, 2015; Glendon, 1991). Considering the plurality of positions on and approaches to the common good, it is crucial not to essentialise this concept and to always place it in an historical and geographical context, while taking into account diverse points of view (Schmid & Sheikhzadegan, 2022, 8–9). Whereas some chapters of this volume consider the question of the common good from a theoretical theological perspective, others have an empirical focus. The question of whether Islamic social work should be limited to Muslim service users or also target clients beyond Muslim communities are highlighted across three chapters, each with a different focus and approach.

Brodard applies an empirical method regarding the question as to why many Islamic organisations focus on Muslim service users while claiming to serve the common good. He observes that as Islamic canonical sources can be interpreted both in favour of prioritising Muslim beneficiaries and serving the common good in a wider context, depending on their ideological stance, Muslim organisations either adopt a particularistic or universalistic approach to social work (2022, 38). Likewise, Hussain argues that the different approaches to the study of *maṣalih* (plural of *maṣlaḥa*, common good) show considerable potential, but that the richness of this discourse is often lost when translated into the grassroots welfare and charitable organisations of Muslim communities (2022, 130). The result is often a rather simplified and conservative public discourse which focuses on fulfilling the five essential objectives of Shariʿa (preservation of religion, life, intellect, lineage and property) (Hussain, 2022, 126). Thus, an ambiguous discursive tradition forms the starting point for contemporary positioning.

Hussain draws on the Islamic concept of *maṣlaḥa ʿamma* (common good) to show how one could use Islamic legal thought to derive guidelines for social work that would go beyond Muslim communities to also address more general objectives, such as human development in the wider context of a Western nation. He concludes

that although *maqāṣid-cum-maṣalih* has time and again enabled the scholars of *uṣūl al-fiqh* (principles of law) to propose reforms that would help Muslims to root their practices more contextually, it nevertheless has limitations and cannot therefore always deliver solutions for the contemporary 'Muslim condition' in Western contexts (2022, 134–135). Favouring an approach based on human needs according to Maslow, Hussain shows a rather individual focus in his concept of the common good.

Sahin proposes the concept of "relational ethics" to show the Shariʿa's potential for enabling Muslims to actively promote the common good in Western contexts. Arguing that Habermas' model of universal communication on an equal footing fails to include "minority voices" (2022, 183), he follows a virtue ethics approach, based on Aristotle and MacIntyre, which provides a space in which Islamic ideas of a good life can be explored. Criticising the 'reified' approach to Shariʿa, as adopted by certain groups of Muslims, he emphasises the role of Muslim faith leaders in engaging with the wider society. Arguing from a rather communitarian stance, he maintains that such an engagement should go beyond "mere conversations", to facilitate convergence "in addressing inequalities, renewing public trust and working towards peaceful coexistence" (Sahin, 2022, 196). In so doing, Muslims would help to cultivate "values of shared relational ethics" with the aim of forming "an inclusive conception of the common good" (Sahin, 2022, 197). In this way, Sahin shows how a distinctly Muslim profile in the field of social work and in other sectors of activity can be compatible with an approach oriented towards the common good.

Brodard shows that there are further practical factors which are relevant beyond theological reflections: firstly, the focus on Muslims often resulted from the over-representation of Muslims among excluded social groups such as illegal migrants, the homeless, prisoners or urban youth living in distressed neighbourhoods (2022, 38–39). Furthermore, prioritising Muslim beneficiaries may be based on strategic considerations, simply because an 'intracultural' approach to social work can lead to better funding opportunities and facilitate the cooperation of Muslim organisations with statutory social work bodies (Brodard, 2022, 40). This illustrates that the way Muslim organisations and faith leaders approach the common good also depends on the wider society's expectations of them (Schmid & Brodard, 2020).

A paradoxical discourse situation is revealed here: on the one hand, Muslims are expected to actively demonstrate their contribution to the common good. On the other, under the umbrella of security and prevention policy, they are supported in setting up specific services for at-risk Muslim target groups (Hernández Aguilar, 2018, 95, 158). Sahin's call for Muslims to converge towards, rather than merely converse with, wider society as well as his pleading for an "inclusive public space" (2022, 196) is an indication that it cannot only be about steps towards participation of Muslims, but also the further development of an inclusive discursive framework.

To summarise, the sources of Islam as well as the manifold history of scholarly work on Islamic ethics can be drawn upon to determine guidelines which combine community service with activities that serve the common good in wider society. Real-life conditions, however, may hamper the ability of Muslim communities to

fully exploit this potential. Against this background, the following sets of questions can be identified for further research:

- *Criteria for the common good*: According to what criteria can intra-community activities be understood as a contribution to the common good, perhaps by promoting a respect for the law, boosting positive self-identity (Irfan, 2022, 61) or providing bridging social capital (Hussain, 2022, 122)? How can liberal and communitarian positions on the common good be reconciled?
- *Theological reflection*: How can the concept of the common good be problematised more clearly at the interface of individual needs, community experiences and social framework? How can further sources, for example from Shiʿi traditions, be better integrated into a debate largely focused on Sunni perspectives?
- *Transfer to wider debates*: How can these theological reflections, of which the empirical contributions to this volume show relatively few traces, be implemented in contemporary Western contexts? How can Muslim scholars contribute to wider academic, as well as political, debates?
- *Discursive framework*: How can a debate on welfare and the common good be conducted so that minorities can participate? How can the common good be made even more plural by integrating positions which include different worldviews and religions?

These questions are only partly Islam-specific, as they also concern social work in a broader sense. Nevertheless, they clearly show that many issues regarding Islam and the common good are yet to be dealt with and new approaches are to be sought, before Islamic social work can efficiently promote the contribution of Muslims to the wellbeing of all.

Islamic Social Work as Alternative Social Work

In the face of migration, pluralisation and globalisation, Islam raises anew the question of how social work should be conceptualised in regard to these changes. Given the limitations of mainstream social work, an alternative approach is required to address this challenge. The contributions in Part III can especially be seen as expressions of alternative, post-secular, dynamic and contextual social work that highlight the religious dimensions of working with Muslim service users. The authors approach the encounter between social work and Islamic concepts in different ways: Abdullah speaks of an intersection and argues that practices and values of service users need to be assessed (2022, 239–240). According to Ashencaen Crabtree, one has "to step back, rethink and re-imagine social work" (2022, 261).

The authors also have different visions of this encounter: whereas Ashencaen Crabtree (2022) focuses on transformation of social work in general, Abdullah (2022) and other contributors look predominantly at Muslim service users. Ashencaen Crabtree also underscores the necessity of dialogue between mainstream and Islamic social work, by referring to Islamic concepts as well as cultural

practices and traditions. For instance, she draws on the concept *umma* (community) to look at boundary-making on different levels. She also uses the South Asian Muslims' tradition of *ʿizza* (honour) to critically address a pressure to conform which she believes she observes in social work (2022, 259–260). Western social work is thus supposed to critically examine itself in the mirror of Muslim discourses. This also shows the potential of Islamic social work to participate in broader debates, far beyond the sphere of Muslim protagonists. However, both a focus on Muslim service users (Abdullah, 2022; Afrouz & Crisp, 2022; Schröer & Ürek, 2022) and a call for the transformation of mainstream social work in the mirror of Islam/Muslims (Ashencaen Crabtree, 2022) have their limitations: using *tawba* in a social work intervention, as outlined by Abdullah, presupposes far-reaching theological skills which social workers usually do not possess. Therefore, cooperation with imams and religious institutions will probably be necessary. Furthermore, she considers *tawba* in a wider sense, as a "principle of change" (2022, 240) which may entail the risk of altering its profile and semantic potential. As for *Ashencaen Crabtree*'s contribution, the following questions could be raised: is there not a risk of essentialising Islamic concepts by trying to incorporate them in Western social work? And how can they be made fruitful for people who are not Muslims and for whom these concepts and traditions do not have any normative impact?

Despite these open questions, the approaches of the two authors, and of the other contributors to Part III, can be understood as possible aspects of an alternative social work, the guidelines of which can be summarised as follows:

- *Etemic approach*: When this volume brings together theological and social-science approaches, the intention is not to restrict oneself to either a neutral outsider or a partisan insider perspective, but to consider their overlap, as well as their potential for mutual enrichment. It is in this spirit that Ashencaen Crabtree (2022, 250) has proposed to fuse emic and etic to "etemic". This would also mean avoiding drawing disciplinary boundaries too narrowly and providing space for a variety of different perspectives in social work. On a practical level, social workers would be seen in the role of "translating faith practices and beliefs" (Cheruvallil-Contractor et al., 2022, 93) and mediating between different perspectives.
- *Self-critique*: Becoming open to different and alternative approaches also requires a critique of "social work ontologies" (Ashencaen Crabtree, 2022, 250) and of "failings in the profession" (Ashencaen Crabtree, 2022, 251). This would include a deconstruction of "misperceptions as to what it means to be Muslim" (Afrouz & Crisp, 2022, 214). Instead of claiming a universally valid paradigm of social work, it is important to question one's own standpoint and thus be open to dialogue with alternative approaches. However, any self-criticism should not be limited to mainstream approaches, but extend to Islamic social work and various forms of indigenous social work. The need to first assert oneself and find recognition does not provide exemption from the requirement to also deal with other approaches when self-reflecting.

- *Critical integration and transformation*: It is essential to discuss Islamic concepts critically when integrating them into the broader framework of social work. After all, "religious beliefs of many persuasions have at times been used to oppress individuals and communities" (Afrouz & Crisp, 2022, 214). Therefore, instead of a "wholesale adoption" (Ashencaen Crabtree, 2022, 250), a reflective inclusivity is required. The purpose here should not be mere acceptance of Islamic contributions, but rather letting social work itself be transformed (Ashencaen Crabtree, 2022, 255–256). This requires a willingness to learn and a dynamic understanding of the profession.
- *Tolerance of ambiguity*: A hermeneutical approach to the canonical sources of Islam inevitably results in ambiguity (Hussain, 2022, 130; Kurnaz, 2022, 148–149) when it comes to working out guidelines for Islamic social work in Western contexts. Cultural and religious references should therefore not be essentialised but considered in a multi-voiced discussion. As Brodard (2022) has shown, such ambiguity is even felt in the field when Muslim communities deal with the question of whether to prioritise Muslims in their care services.
- *Conflict capacity*: Interaction between social work and religion may also be conflictual, especially as there are sometimes tensions between a human rights approach to social work (Crisp, 2017, 376; Staub-Bernasconi, 2016) and cultural sensitivity (Afrouz & Crisp, 2022) or the "rigid requirements" (Abdullah, 2022, 240) of organised religion. There are also occasionally conflictual interactions between Muslim social workers and 'mainstream' social workers (Verba & Guélamine, 2022, 72–73), as well as between individuals and their communities (Afrouz & Crisp, 2022, 220–221). A further dimension of conflict may occur between social work ideals and the state framework. Finally, Islamic social work may also have to deal with conflicts between local practices, such as shame killings or *ʿizza* (Ashencaen Crabtree, 2022, 259), and a humanistic interpretation of Islam by Muslim scholars.
- *Overcoming hierarchies*: Hierarchies between statutory and migrant social work, between different cultures, and between social worker and client need to be dismantled. Relationships on an equal footing, a dialogue between different sets of values and "collaboration with service users" (Afrouz & Crisp, 2022, 213) would facilitate mutual transformation and help a "relational spirituality" (Abdullah, 2022, 241) emerge. This would, furthermore, let social work be conducted "with, rather than, for" (Schröer & Ürek, 2022, 224) clients. Notwithstanding, inequalities and differences in status will not be completely overcome but should be made visible and critically considered in comparative studies.
- *Exposing hostilities*: Service users may face "xenophobia, discrimination and stigmatisation if they were identified as Muslims" (Afrouz & Crisp, 2022, 213). Social work should therefore expose any form of overt or hidden Islamophobia, which fosters "a sense of isolation and vulnerability" (Ashencaen Crabtree, 2022, 252) among Muslims, no matter whether it is conducted in the name of secularism, integration, defence of human rights or whatsoever, or whether it is

practiced by non-Muslims or Islam-unfriendly Muslims. This does not, however, mean that it should remain silent if some cultural practices violate general 'principles of social work' (IFSW). At the same time, Islamic social work should take into account that there are "multiple sources of structural oppression" (Afrouz & Crisp, 2022, 213) and thus avoid attributing them all to Islamophobia. In this way, it becomes clear that Islamophobia, while an important challenge (Schmid & Sheikhzadegan, 2022, 5–6), should not be seen as a key category. To do so would be no less one-sided than a constant focus on prevention against radicalisation in social work (Schmid & Brodard, 2020). Thus, the different empirical examples in this volume also show that the challenges and concerns of Islamic social work are much more diverse.

These methodological, hermeneutical and ethical guidelines cannot only be applied in relation to Islam and Muslims but can also help shape alternative approaches to social work in a broader context. Moreover, they allow for a balance between a strictly universalistic approach and a relativistic particularism and include both an ability to learn and a willingness to face conflicts including those with a cultural focus.

The contributions to this volume go beyond the theoretical aspects of alternative social work to also present practical models. As a grassroots association the Meeting and Training Centre for Muslim Women (*Begegnungs- und Fortbildungszentrum muslimischer Frauen*, BFmF) in Germany can be seen as an example of a bottom-up initiative that enjoys a growing professionalism and has already become a recognised service-providing institution (Schröer & Ürek, 2022). The broad networking and cooperation of this association represents a counterweight to potential "divisive and isolationist" (Hussain, 2022, 122) tendencies. However, this case cannot be generalised, as it has come into existence within the framework of a developed welfare state that offers support for FBOs and considers them as partners (Schmid, 2022). Comparable development conditions hardly exist in any other context. Furthermore, there is a risk of idealising this single case, with its success story as "a pioneer in the development of an innovative, model Muslim social institution" (Schröer & Ürek, 2022, 227) without practicing necessary self-critique. For example, the assumed "bridging function" (Schröer & Ürek, 2022, 227) implies a binary concept of German and migrant cultures, neglecting transcultural overlaps and hybrid identities. The cooperation model between welfare providers and the state also opens up Islamic social work to much larger target groups beyond Muslims (Brodard, 2022). In the case of BFmF the supposed composition of the beneficiaries and the actual mix of beneficiaries could be examined more closely. Lastly, this case illustrates that it is possible to simultaneously represent social work and Islamic social work which raises the question of how the adjective 'Islamic' can be determined at all.

Islamic Social Work, between Emancipation and 'Identity Trap'

The final question to be discussed is what the 'Islamic' in Islamic social work consists of: it is ambivalent, as what makes Islamic social work specific and what "added value" (Brodard, 2022, 40) it represents may be queried. However, depending on the specific standards and requirements of the respective country, there are varying degrees of pressure within welfare systems placed on Islamic social work to secularise itself (Schmid, 2022, 113–114). The discrepancy between an ambition to demonstrate the specificities of Islamic social work and the requirement to become secularised carries a high potential for tensions, if not outright conflict. The attribute 'Islamic' can be applied to different elements of Islamic social work: providers, beneficiaries and underlying thought. From a strictly secular point of view, the attribution as Islamic may have both a demarcation function and a normative character:

> To constitute something as "Islamic" is thus necessarily an act of authorization, legitimation and inclusion: we are authorizing and legitimating that Islamic thing as being constituted by the normative value "Islam," and are including it with other things that we are similarly authorizing and legitimating in normative terms. (Ahmed, 2016, 107)

Such acts represent a great challenge, not least in view of the diversity and contradictions of phenomena and positions subsumed under Islamic social work. This can also lead to disputes about whether something is 'sufficiently' or 'appropriately' Islamic.

Labelling a certain approach as Islamic social work is firstly the expression of a continuing presence of religion in both individual and social life. However, it can also be the expression of an attempt to "Islamise knowledge" (Al-Faruqi, 1988), in order to promote a collective identity and possibly oppose secularism. Placing 'Islamic' values, methodologies and practices in the foreground increases the risk of a conflict with mainstream social work. This approach, which has rather been developed by authors from outside the Western world (Albrithen, 2019; Ragab, 2016) can be understood as a postcolonial emancipatory endeavour. The debate shows that it is a question which goes beyond social work to encompass other disciplines. The question of demarcation and closer definition, however, does not only relate to the attribute 'Islamic', but also to the scope of social work. Some of the authors of this volume link Islamic social work to neighbouring domains, such as chaplaincy (Brodard, 2022) or religious education (Schröer & Ürek, 2022, 223), that face similar challenges. However, chaplaincy comprises prayer, Qurʾan recitation and exchanges about questions of faith; religious education refers to contextualising religious knowledge practice, which clearly legitimates its 'Islamic' character. Consequently, a comparison of social work with these two domains tends to exacerbate the profile issue.

Several contributors refer to the issue of the 'Islamic' in social work. While pleading for an open concept of Islamic social work, Kurnaz sees a clear limitation here: "It is true however that such dynamism can lead to uncertainty when tackling the question of what 'Islamic social work' actually is." (2022, 145)

Cheruvallil-Contractor, Halford and Phiri emphasise how "religious identities are continually evolving in response to religious and cultural norms" (2022, 93). Hussain identifies the risk that "the pursuit of a specific 'Islamic' framework for social actions" (2022, 132) can turn into "a highly parochialist view" (Hussain, 2022, 132), based on public relations and competition. Schröer and Ürek also point out that "there are currently no homogeneous answers to the question as to what exactly the adjective Islamic means in the term Islamic social work" (2022, 221). On the other hand, assuming something like a "Muslim collective consciousness" (Abdullah, 2022, 234) or a "common belief system and shared familiarity in Muslim culture and tradition" (Abdullah, 2022, 242) when speaking about Islamic social work can be seen as an attempt to provide a unifying normative basis, but risks overlooking the diversity of Islamic practices and faith convictions. While all contributions in this volume are careful to differentiate and to be sensitive to this diversity, there is still a danger of essentialising.

One possibility would be to see the sense of 'Islamic' determined by the 'Muslimness' of the protagonists, through what they do and articulate "as a potential site or locus for expression and articulation of being Muslim" (Ahmed, 2016, 538). However, Islamic social work does not necessarily signify "community social work" (Schmid & Sheikhzadegan, 2022, 7) in a narrow sense and can also mean the use of Islamic religious ideas and spiritual concepts (Ashencaen Crabtree, 2022; Abdullah, 2022). In this sense, Islamic social work is determined by "special reference to the Muslim tradition" (Kurnaz, 2022, 144) and Muslim protagonists engaging with it. Traces of this can be found both within Muslim communities and in more secular settings, e. g. in partnerships between different organisations or in the social commitments of individuals in civil society. A Muslim motivation and meaning that is constitutive for the actions of Muslim protagonists does not necessarily have to lead to a *proprium* of Islamic social work, as has likewise been argued in the context of Christian charity (Haslinger, 2009, 192–197). The services and activities provided by Islamic social work would in many cases, or perhaps even most, correspond to those of other providers. Muslim social work is therefore not 'social work plus'. Here again, the concept of the generalisation of values can be utilised, as it enables a combination of "general content on one hand, and specific roots and binding forces on the other" (Schmid, 2022, 102). Universal principles of social work and specific cultural or religiously shaped legitimations and resources can therefore go together, simply because universal principles remain dependent on particular foundations and underpinnings:

> (…) through this process of generalization, people who feel bound to a tradition find new ways to articulate it by engaging with social change or the representatives of other traditions. If this occurs on both sides of a process of engagement involving different value traditions it may lead to a new and authentic sense of commonality. (Joas, 2013, 181)

Traditional ties are the starting point of a process that requires exchange with the social context as well as with other traditions. In this way, commonalities can be discovered without having to reach a complete consensus. Instead, this exchange leads to a "mutual modification of our own traditions as well as finding stimuli for

their renewal" (Joas, 2013, 181). The different theological and ethical contributions in this volume can be seen as an expression of such a process of change and renewal.

In addition to this more structural argument, a look at the individual can help to further differentiate the question of the 'Islamic' in social work. In Sahin's concept of "relational autonomy" people are viewed as "socially embedded beings with intersecting identity markers of gender, ethnicity, class and religion" (Sahin, 2022, 184). Such intersectionality requires prudence in attributing the label "Muslim", as there is a risk of homogenisation, instead of focusing on "multiple realities and layered identities" (Cheruvallil-Contractor et al., 2022, 84) – not only on an individual level, but also in the collective practice of Islamic social work. Therefore, Cheruvallil-Contractor, Halford and Phiri argue that individual narratives, instead of collective ones, should stand in the foreground, and that: "This does not require new classifications within social work" (2022, 94). Similarly, caution is needed when talking about Muslim service users. In this sense, Afrouz and Crisp emphasise "a complex array of factors including personal attitudes and perspectives, family and community obligations, and perceptions as to the acceptability of wearing hijab" (2022, 211). The complexity and diversity of identities must be underlined, as opposed to the widespread, one-sided attributions in the style of a "singular-affiliation view" (Sen, 2006, 25) that trap people into a "solitarist understanding of identity" (Sen, 2006, 79):

> Muslims, like all other people in the world, have many different pursuits, and not all of their priorities and values need be placed within their singular identity of being Islamic. (Sen, 2006, 14)

In this sense, it would also be wrong to consider Islamic social work to be devoid of any characteristics other than being Islamic. As several contributions of this volume have shown, the social context and the respective welfare system constitute key formative factors for Islamic social work. It would therefore make more sense to ascribe other attributes to it, depending on the particular case. As already emphasised in the introduction to this volume: "The minimal condition for social work to be characterised as Islamic is that at least the underlying social thought has a connection to Islam." (Schmid & Sheikhzadegan, 2022, 11) However, this one element can be complemented by others with very different frames of reference: for instance, social work can be both Islamic and society-critical, political, humanistic, human rights-based, gender-sensitive, etc. The category 'Islamic' then becomes more inclusive and cannot be dismissed anymore as "only a motley crew of similarities which we cannot tie together" (Ahmed, 2016, 242).

Another observation that can be made is that Christian social work is more rarely spoken of (Mahler, 2018; Scales & Kelly, 2016). If 'general' social work allows for a plural spectrum of possibilities and is open to cultural, religious and spiritual diversity, it may be possible to dispense with the addition of the attribute 'Islamic'. This would make 'Islamic' a provisional attribute, which would mainly make sense in the context of integration debates. Once this has become a self-evident and recognised part of a larger whole, this attribute may be dropped. A cautious use of the attribute 'Islamic', mindful of its different nuances of meaning, attributions and discursive contexts is necessary.

Such considerations represent permanent challenges that cannot be easily resolved. It will be a matter of finding ways to address these challenges, characterised by the visibility of specific profiles on the one hand, and communicability within a wider framework of plural society on the other. As many of the authors of this volume emphasise: Islamic social work is both a practice and a discipline in the making. In that respect, this exploration ends with the invitation to further exploration.

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