

## ***Islamic social work: From Community Services to Commitment to the Common Good***

### **11-12 September 2019**

The conference “Islamic social work: From Community Services to Commitment to the Common Good” was organised by the Swiss Centre for Islam and Society of the University of Fribourg with the support of the Mercator Foundation Switzerland and the Swiss National Science Foundation. The annual international conference that gathered keynote guests Dr. Mohamed Bajrafil and Prof. Dr. Michel Younès took place on Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2019 at the University of Fribourg in front of a heterogeneous audience. On September 12, different panels dealt with various topics in the field of Islamic social work.

#### **11 September 2019**

Prof. Dr. Hansjörg Schmid introduced the event announcing the guest speakers as well as the global context of the conference and the program for the following day. The conference aims to question current shifts in social work, with a possible reintroduction of religion in the field, as well as the development of social activities within Islamic associations. The latter often aim to benefit to the common good and not only the Muslim community. The conference establishes a link with radicalisation to question the ways in which counter-discourses may affect young Muslims. Besides, the role of Islamic social work in preventing radicalisation is to be explored: how may social work contribute to preventing religious extremism?

#### **1st part : Dr Mohamed Bajrafil**

Born in the Comoros, Dr Mohamed Bajrafil serves as an Imam in France. With a Ph.D. in linguistics, he was trained for 16 years in traditional Islamic sciences and Arabic. He is the author of three published books on Islam in France and is a well-known Muslim speaker.

Dr Bajrafil began his talk by presenting the definition of radicalisation by Ali Gomaa, Islamic scholar and ex-Grand Mufti of Egypt, who proposed in his book “Al



mutashaddidun” three elements which indicate radicalisation: a) Thinking that the whole world is against Islam; b) Feeling the need to face this foreign aggression; c) Considering that this resistance is the duty of each Muslim.

Agreeing with these criteria, Dr. Bajrafil insisted on the need to develop an accurate counter-discourse based on a deep understanding of these characteristics. He added that all religions are based on altruism and solidarity between humans, as explained in some Islamic traditions fully in line with Christian and Jewish teachings. But Islamic social work is divided between two positions: intra-Muslim charity and the charity benefitting the “others” (the non-Muslims). Radicalised people identified by the three criteria mentioned above would only promote intra-Muslim social work and aid.

Dr. Bajrafil then addressed the Wahhabism propagation in Africa. He clearly linked proselytising with Saudi geopolitical interest, which used Wahhabism both to counter pan-Arabism and to position itself at the central stage of the Muslim world. This plan was implemented through religious books distribution, foreign Imams training through scholarships, and finally, social work and humanitarian aid abroad.

Social projects and humanitarian aid implemented by Islamic organisations in Africa concerned three different areas: 1) the field of education, by establishing schools, orphanages and universities; 2) the field of health by building hospitals and health centres; 3) the distribution of religious books through humanitarian organisations and aid projects. Focusing on this last point, Dr. Bajrafil discovered that not only Saudi-led NGOs but also French Muslim organisations distributed Wahhabi booklets while constructing wells in West African countries. Wahhabism is then also propagated through humanitarian aid. But Muslim NGOs are diverse and differ in their practices. Some promote an intra-Muslim approach, emphasising the concept of *Ummah* and the idea that Muslims have to help Muslims. But others Muslim organisations promote a social work which benefits to everyone regardless of religious belongings. And this could have very strong and positive impact on the beneficiaries.

The Imam concluded by saying that some Islamic social work and aid projects which are exclusivist can serve the purpose of spreading ideologies and proselytising. Conversely, Islamic social work with an inclusive approach is able to fight the same ideologies. Therefore, Islamic social work can be both the problem and the solution, depending on its inclusiveness or exclusiveness.

## 2nd Part : Prof. Dr. Michel Younès

Prof. Dr Michel Younès teaches systematic theology of religions and Islamic studies at the Catholic University of Lyon. He is also in charge of trainings in the field of radicalisation and projects related to Islam in Europe.

Prof. Dr Michel Younès began his presentation by situating his perspective and his research on radicalisation issues. His approach is grounded on field observations rather than theoretical perspectives. From the field, he observed that it is difficult to evaluate and define what is a radicalised person. Radicalisation is difficult to detect. How can it be seen? Are appearances, such as a beard, a veil or a refusal to shake hands reflect a radicalisation process? Or is it rather the discourses which may indicate radicalisation? He argued that the rationale behind the behaviour is more important than the behaviour itself, so the emphasis should be on the meaning given by the actors to their actions .

These observations encourage Prof. Dr Younès not to focus on radicalisation in itself, but on the ways in which violence is expressed. It is not the dress code or the beard, but the meaning given by the actor which may express rejection of society. In that case, these behaviours become issues that must be tackled by social work. But that is where the debate comes in: if social work is supposed to fight radicalism, it can also be a vector of radicalisation, when it promotes an exclusivist approach.

Ideologies underpin radicalisation. Responding to Dr Bajrafil's presentation, Dr Younès proposed three different levels to define radicalisation: a) Self-perception and sectarian identity: conspiracy theories and resistance towards conspiracies; b) Use of a literalist reading of the religious scriptures. Fundamentalist approach promoting a totalitarian approach to society: everything is regulated by a single factor; c) Apologetic approach and binary vision which distinguishes between the « good » and the « bad » ones.

These ideological factors are being spread within the society by social structures. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood movement used aid projects and social work to diffuse its ideology. In agreement with Dr Bajrafil's speech, Dr Younès argued that two types of social work have to



be differentiated: an approach aiming at helping all people, and another focused on its own community through an exclusivist approach.

In the field, Prof. Dr Younès observed that so-called radicalised people usually structure their world vision around four aspects: 1) belonging to a social group, often considered as a second family; 2) serving a noble cause, which is in line with the narratives of apologetic or conspiracy views; 3) acting against the global conspiracy; 4) Looking at the world through binary lenses (opposing good and bad, or justice and injustice). According to Prof. Dr. Younès, counter-discourses do not aim to change these worldviews, but to dissuade and prevent the use of violence. In this perspective, it is crucial to develop human relation and to tackle exclusion: human bonds can contribute to alleviate binary and extremist views. Citing Amine Maalouf, he added that the common good concept must be emphasised: society is diverse and identity belongings are plural. Finally, he emphasised the fact that the world is complex and cannot be reduced to a binary approach opposing good and evil. To conclude, Dr. Younès highlighted the crucial role of diversity and optimism in counter-discourses tackling extremism and radicalisation.

Prof. Dr Schmid introduced the debate by asking a question to Dr Bajrafil on counter-discourses and their efficiency on the youth facing social issues. Dr Bajrafil explained that the main problem of current religious counter-discourses is that they refer to the same authors and sources as extremist groups. Often, the Imam and the radicalised person will read the same texts, giving them a different interpretation. The solution is the humanisation and contextualisation of the traditional Islamic scholars' intellectual production. It is important to explain that the religious scholars lived in their own context and produced norms in line with their experience. Therefore, Scholars' positions should never be disconnected from their living context.

Prof. Dr Younès added that while contextualisation is needed, it is not sufficient. According to him, the theologian figure must be rehabilitated in an age where the jurist still has a central position in the Islamic thought. The theological approach should address any question, including sacredness of life, human rights and freedom a religion. To do so, theologians and not only jurists are needed . Dr Bajrafil agreed with these claims and reminded a tradition from Imam Ali, stating that the Quran does not talk by itself, but its readers make it talk. He pointed

out that speaking about Islam requires an internal perspective starting from the Islamic tradition, because Muslim communities are feeling under pressure and everything coming from outside could be perceived as an aggression in this context. Prof. Dr Younès concluded by arguing that it is needed to refrain from both an idealisation of the past and victim logic.

A few questions from the public were taken in the final discussion. One of them addressed the risk of developing a binary logic opposing two categories of Muslims: the normal Muslims versus the Islamists. Would not this narrative foster radicalisation? Prof. Dr



Younès responded that there is a real threat against society and that work is needed to prevent radicalisation. He denied that there is a public discourse stigmatising Muslims in France. On the contrary, he argued that the French state supports Muslim institutions.

To sum up, both speakers agreed and emphasised the distinction between two trends in Islamic social work: one promoting welfare for everybody and another focusing just on Muslims and excluding others.



## 12 September 2019

### **Keynote: Islamic Social Work as a Contribution to the Common Good**

The first panel of the second day's conference discussed the possibility of theological foundations for Islamic social work. It started with the Keynote by Prof. Dr Serdar Kurnaz of the University of Hamburg on "The *Maqāsid-cum-maslaha* approach as theological basis of Islamic social work – a critical analysis and an alternative proposal".

Prof. Kurnaz started with the concept of *maslaha* as a possible theological foundation of Islamic social work. He contrasted the classical understanding of *maslaha* with its modern understanding – called *maqasid-cum-maslaha*, because *maslaha* is often used interchangeably with the overall objectives of *Sharia*, e.g. *maqasid*. In a next step, he criticised the *maqasid-cum-maslaha* approach based on its theological and methodological shortcomings, such as the arbitrariness in the choice of the *maqasid* or epistemological discrepancies. He then went on to the Qur'anic concept of *ma'rūf* as one possible other foundation for Islamic social work. As *ma'rūf* allows for historical and social circumstances in which known and good actions developed with regard to different sources of knowledge, Prof. Kurnaz considers it a more flexible and practical relevant foundation for Islamic social work. Above all, he pointed out that the Quran trusts people to know how to act and behave in daily life.



Prof. Kurnaz's keynote was followed by a response by Dilwar Hussain, Research Fellow at the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations at the University of Coventry, Lecturer at the University of Leicester and a practitioner in the field. Mr. Hussain agreed with Prof. Kurnaz to be sceptical of the *maqasid-cum-maslaha* approach and to raise the concept of *ma'rūf* as a more suitable basis for social work. He pointed out that one of the key problems in his view is the retro-devised nature of the discipline, e.g. the ideas that are retro-devised from *hudud*. The original ambition of *maqasid* is to protect and therefore to limit behaviour, which is a negative instead of a positive perspective. He stressed that he prefers to ask what human flourishing looks like, i.e. to adopt a positive perspective. In his view, thinking in this area is rather underdeveloped, as often philosophical-ethical ideas are not perceived as "Islamic". As the concept of *ma'rūf* is general and open enough and linked to '*urf*, i.e. encompasses a particular connotation of local customs and traditions, it can be a very useful basis for social work.



### **Panel 1: Islamic Social Work in (Post-) Secular Spaces**

In this panel, the focus was on how state actors dominated by non-Muslim majorities in France and the UK perceive Muslim Social Work and how they interact with it. Prof. Daniel Verba (University Paris XIII) talked first, pointing out that France is one of the most secularised countries on earth and how the legal framework of *laïcité* developed.

For Verba, *laïcité* does not just mean secularism, but specific legislation that has been governing the separation of church and state in France since 1905. Verba insists that while the law does keep religion out of the state's sphere, it also protects freedom of religion. However, many French people nowadays misunderstand *laïcité* to be anti-religious. The older generation of French social workers in particular do not want to take religion into account, claiming it to be detrimental to the scientific foundation of their work.

Younger social workers however are starting to be more open to taking into account knowledge about religious backgrounds and the identities of the people they are working with – simply for the pragmatic reason that it helps them understand their clients better and doing their work more effectively. Verba encouraged such an approach, but ended by warning against the idea some French cities had to hire people to do social work only on the basis of their ethnic or religious background. While knowing about religion can be helpful to do good social work, one needs first to be educated about social work, Verba said. Therefore, social work needs to be performed by professionals.

Moving over from France to the UK, Sara Ashencaen Crabtree described a context in which there is no controversy about acknowledging religion as a factor in social work, but this is not always done in a positive way. In fact, references to Islam in the British public discussion of recent years have often been negative, hateful, or – as she preferred to describe it – islamophobic. Giving examples not only from more marginal politicians such as Nigel Farage, but also from Prime Minister Boris Johnson himself, she passionately mourned the increasing acceptance of Islamophobia at the highest level of the State, but also in everyday life. She mentioned the absurd story of a counterterrorism student who was arrested for reading a book on terrorism. After a description of how social work had evolved historically in the UK, always having a (Christian) religious dimension, she went on to suggest some aspects of Islamic practice and doctrine, such as zakat and umma, that can be made fruitful for building a link between Islamic thought and social work. Social work, based on an Islamic understanding, can help British Muslims emancipate and build relations based on mutual care and respect among themselves and with their non-Muslim neighbours, said Dr Ashencaen Crabtree.



## Panel 2: Field of Action: Youth and Family

In the second panel, Prof. Abdullah Sahin from the University of Warwick UK dealt with the topic "Human Dignity, Common God and Social Welfare: towards an Islamic Relational Social Ethics". His lecture contained a practical reference and granted a deep theological insight into the contemporary theological thinking. He criticised the fact that there is currently too little empirical theology within Islam and that Islamic legal thinking often overrules the text.

His empirical research, which he did in the UK with Muslim adolescents, was preceded by the question of how education is mentioned or imagined in the Quran or how the prophet show how should education be. He distinguish between concept of religion, something which is inherited, and religiosity, something that has been experienced within a different cultural context (din and tadayun). For this purpose, he also looked at some theories from the field of psychology of religion, focusing in particular on one aspect of Erikson's concept of developmental psychology, which deals with identity formation and role confusion. He developed an empirical assessment model to understand how young people form their religiosity.

Prof. Sahin identifies a great danger and the possible initiation of rigidity and radicalisation in young people developing identity foreclosure and continues his lecture by discussing how education in Islam could actually counter this. Thus, he uses the concept of Tarbiya from the Quran, which is a very dynamic concept based on learners needs.

God himself in the Quran as rabb al alemin is the educator par excellence. Therefore the key-notion is God as a God, who listens and does not always instructs and pass judgment. He starts from empirical data and rethink theology by creating an Islamic understanding of human nature. Simultaneously, Dr. Sahin takes a critical look at contextual problems such as the ambivalence over the continuing social significance of religion and increasing negative perception of religion within the secular polity. In addition, identity politics and politics of suspicion belong to it, reinforcing binary juxtaposition: Islam/West, religion/secular, colonial-imperial/decolonial.



In Islam Dr Sahin sees a place for an inclusive secularism but not for the State's regulation of religion or religiosity. Critical openness, sharing space, social space and physical context requires critical conversations.

According to him Islam has the ability to put itself into perspective, which is not to be confused with postmodern relativism. What is meant by Dr. Sahin is that people should be able to understand that humans are creatures with bodies, cultural contexts and exist in relation to each other. Human dignity should be connected to the idea of gratitude, which is a very big concept in the Quran.

The second part of this panel contained a best practice example of Islamic social work, thus building a bridge between theory and practice. Ms.



Birsen Ürek introduced the Centre for Muslim Women in Cologne, which started in 1996 as a self-empowerment project for Muslim women.

Women from different backgrounds wanted to provide Muslim women with a place where they could come together, learn from each other and talk about all kind of issues, including non-religious matters. The German language was the element they had in common. The mosques were not adequate places to implement this project, as language was often a problem, mostly for converts. Often, they could not follow the Imam, because he was speaking in the respective language and not in German.

Therefore, they started to build this institution near the University of Cologne as volunteers and everyone could contribute from their own background. Now the women working there are an interprofessional team open to everybody and not only to Muslim women. Non-Muslim women may be both part of the staff and members and take part in the activities. Muslim men are also

involved and the institution has some male supporters, but they are not allowed to be part of the board.

Many female graduates were unemployed because of matters like the hijab and they found an job opportunity there, working for example as teachers for German courses and contributing their ideas to the Centre. Women who are involved in the Centre are proud Muslimas and see themselves as a part of German society. They also want to show their Muslim identity as a positive aspect.

The Centre offers education in the areas of language and integration, religious education, children and young people and much more. There are also projects on refugee work and Muslim women as bridge builders. The many awards that the Centre has received show that such best practice examples are necessary in addition to the theoretical framing of Islamic social work.

### **Panel 3: Field of Action: Exclusion and Resocialisation**

The third panel coped with exclusion and resocialisation in the field of action. The first panellist, Baptiste Brodard, PhD student at the University of Fribourg, provided an insight into

the paradoxes

of Islamic

social work

based on his

research

findings. He

demonstrated

three case

studies which

were



conducted within the framework of Islamic welfare organisations and social work in French and Swiss prisons. Muslim stakeholders were asserting that they foster an impartial and universalist approach in order to provide their social services to a wide range of people without taking their racial or religious background into consideration. However, his findings revealed that their efforts are primarily aimed at assisting de facto Muslim communities. Islamic welfare organisations explain this paradox by referring to the great numbers of Muslims in need, which

indicate that the Muslim population is often affected by social negligence and geopolitical conflicts. Hence, actors involved in Islamic social work need to overcome this current challenge by trying to keep a “Universalist social work approach” while providing community-based services.

Lamia Irfan, lecturer at the London School of Oriental and African Studies, covered the second part of the panel. She emphasised in her presentation the importance of the Muslim religious communities in the context of the reintegration and resettlement of Muslim offenders in society in the UK. Religious communities play an important role in building new positive identities, providing a space away from crime and helping to build a structure into the lives of offenders. Further, their aim is to reintegrate prisoners into the common workforce in order to guarantee their financial independence. During this process, “clean” offenders will act as prime examples for others who still have to take the path towards resettlement. The goal of their work is part of the general social effort to keep Muslims away from criminal activities. Thereby, former offenders do not only act as deterrents against crime but also as “wound healer” in the handling of other prisoners.

With the contribution of these two panellists, the audience was presented on the one hand with an insight into the action of providers of social work and on the other hand with the reception of the services by the affected community.



#### **Panel 4: Towards a Practical Theology of Islam**

The last session of the conference was a Panel with the title ”Towards a Practical Theology in Islam.” After a variety of insights in the practice of practical theology during the day, the last speakers , both researchers in Islamic theology, showed the different approaches of practical theology in various contexts (Canadian and German) for its reconciliation.



Dr. Nazila Isgandarova, faculty member at Emmanuel College of Victoria University in the University of Toronto, also a registered psychotherapist, presented a brief introduction of Christian theology and its ongoing process of practical theology and the similarities with Islamic practical theology. She explained the wish in Canada to build a relationship between the field and academia. With examples from her counselling practice, she showed the role of theology in daily life issues and the need for a systematic reflection on these issues. She argued for an integrative approach of theology and social sciences to reflect life experiences and produce new practice as an effective response to changing needs.

The second speaker, Prof. Dr. Tarek Badawia, Professor for Islamic Religious Studies with a focus on religious education/pedagogy at Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg presented his approach on the field of Islamic practical theology from a historical perspective. Subsequently, he also discussed the context of Germany and its conditions for Islamic theology and showed, with examples from historical sources, the actions field of Foundations (*vaqf*, *ewqaf*). Finally, he extended his view with the socio-ethical significance of Islam in the lived religion.

