

PhD project outline Baptiste Brodard

Preliminary title

Islamic practices and discourses in response to social exclusion - Grassroots Islamic social action in Switzerland.

Abstract and research goals

In Switzerland as well as in other Western European countries, some Islamic organizations have implemented social projects to tackle various issues such as poverty, exclusion, religious extremism and racism which could drive to conflicts and marginalization. At the same time, some Muslim scholars have developed discourses and have highlighted theological viewpoints to tackle these issues and to propose alternative solutions. Considering the historical development of Muslim communities in Western Europe, the involvement of Muslims in the social and welfare field is quite recent and has not been deeply studied yet. It represents a sign of Muslims involvement as a new citizenship practice based on faith and community. For this reason, it has driven to fears, interrogations or support in the localities and nations in which it took place. In parallel, Muslims are overrepresented in prisons and are more likely to be concerned by social issues than other categories. These observations underlines the fact that Islam may be considered by certain people as part of the problem whereas the Islamic organization involved in the social work may show the opposite by their potential positive contribution to the society.

First, this new category of social action based on Islamic faith and identity, which has been called by certain authors “Islamic social work”, often claims to be grounded on Islamic religion. However, the link between concrete social action, speeches of volunteers and leaders and theological discourses has to be explored and they may have differences between the “Islamic” references used by social workers and mainstream or official “Islamic” discourses grounded on theological thoughts.

The thesis will focus on social exclusion and identity-based conflicts, which are two crucial contemporary issues which involve Muslims at a large scale. Indeed, Muslim is the most numerous group in prisons. In parallel, Muslims are often considered as a high-risk group in the Western European countries. The first part of the thesis will give a sociological analysis of those social problems and of statutory social work provided to tackle them. Identity-based conflict will be mostly translated here as a consequence of social exclusion. Hence both of these social issues will be studied simultaneously. This part will also focus on the religious social action and more specifically on the Islamic social work as an alternative to statutory social services.

The second part will study the concrete social investment developed and implemented by Islamic organizations around these social issues in Switzerland and in England. In doing so, I will follow a qualitative empirical approach to observe the organizations and interview their managers with the aim of identifying their motivation, viewpoints and Islamic positions related to their involvement. In Switzerland, three main social projects held by Islamic associations will be investigated. In a second step, some similar projects in other countries will be investigated as well to provide a point of comparison.

The third part, which will be more theological and conceptual, will aim to study the Islamic discourses related to the issues mentioned above and the responses to them such as community social work. The main objective will then be to evaluate to what extent Islamic social work projects are in line with these theological discourses.

These empirical and theoretical studies will finally open the reflection on the role of Islamic contribution to social welfare in the fields of exclusion and identity-based conflicts, both in discourses and concrete projects.