

Workshop ‘Practices of Social Participation and Islamic Social Ethics’ (PSOPIS)

Thursday-Friday, 2-3 October 2025

University of Fribourg

Website

The *Practices of Social Participation and Islamic Social Ethics* (PSOPIS) workshop took place at the University of Fribourg on 2–3 October 2025. It gathered guest speakers and participants from different countries, including the United Kingdom, Norway, and Switzerland. The 2-day event brought together sociological and theological insights on how Islamic social ethics engage with social participation in plural societies. Prof. Dr. Hansjörg Schmid started with an introduction of the PSOPIS project by developing the concept of participation.

Panel 1 examined how non-state and chaplaincy actors shape refugees’ experiences within the Swiss asylum system. Prof. Dr. Jonathan Miaz presented research on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as street-level organizations (SLOs) that both implement and influence asylum policy. Based on ethnographic research within the State Secretariat for Migration and legal aid offices, he showed how NGOs—especially legal aid services—act as “juridical guerrillas,” continuously contesting bureaucratic decisions through appeals and strategic litigation. This process fosters the judicialization of asylum policy, creating both progress and backlash. NGOs thus function as service providers and political actors, navigating and challenging state power simultaneously.

Jeannine Röthlin introduced her study on Muslim chaplaincy in Swiss Federal Asylum Centers, analyzing how chaplains operate within systems shaped by state control and postcolonial dynamics. Early findings depict Muslim chaplains as mediators and caregivers, offering emotional, practical, and spiritual support to refugees and fostering their empowerment.

Future research will investigate who defines the profile of Muslim chaplaincy—the state, the chaplains, or the refugees—and explore responsibility, ethics of care, and empowerment through interviews and observations. Further attention will be given to institutional

expectations tied to security and integration. The panel highlighted the pivotal role of non-state and chaplaincy actors in shaping asylum governance and everyday life in Switzerland.

The 2nd session delved into the complex power relations and asymmetries between Muslim welfare organizations and public institutions in Switzerland and transnationally. Dr. Borchgrevink offered a transnational lens, highlighting how global networks and political contexts shape charitable practices. In contrast, Barbara Schmoutz focused on the local Swiss context, examining how regional differences influence access to welfare and the role of religion.

Participants raised compelling questions about Switzerland's self-perception as a nation and how this identity intersects with cantonal disparities. The varying place of religion across cantons (whether Christian, secular, etc.) could significantly shape welfare policies and the lived experience of religion in everyday life.

Participants noted that the emergence of Muslim welfare organizations in Switzerland seems to be a relatively new phenomenon. A trend toward professionalization was observed, along with a strong sense of responsibility to act in accordance with Islamic principles.

The discussion also touched on how political content within transnational organizations influences the way charity is distributed. Interestingly, whether in local or global contexts, similar tensions arise around the formality of welfare provision, particularly the invisibility of informal support structures.

The 3rd session on "Participation in Islamic Social-Ethical Reflections" was initiated by Dr. Shadaab Rahemtulla from the University of Edinburgh, who discussed *Islamic Social Ethics and Social Participation* through the lens of Islamic Liberation Theology (ILT). In his attempt to highlight how social contexts shape religious knowledge, he examined two main hermeneutical approaches: the *hermeneutics of application*, moving from theology to practice, and the hermeneutics of praxis, which begins from lived experience. Drawing on Fazlur Rahman, he explained the *double-movement theory*: understanding the Qur'an's historical context to extract ethical principles, then reapplying them to present realities. Amina Wadud's feminist exegesis (*Qur'an and Woman, The Gender Jihad*) exemplifies the hermeneutics of application, stressing that theory must inform practice through activism, such as her work with *Sisters in Islam* during her stay in Malaysia. In contrast, he also introduced the approach of Prof. Farid Esack (1997)– the "hermeneutics of praxis", a theology that arises from lived struggle and experience. Rahemtulla concluded that while traditional theology moves from doctrine to action, ILT challenges this hierarchy by giving primacy to praxis, exposing a "hermeneutical anxiety" between theory and lived ethical engagement. Dr. Baptiste Brodard proposed a reflection on how Islamic ethical thought can

inform social participation within European plural societies. Central to his argument is the Maqāṣid methodology, which serves as an ethical tool to align norms and practices with Islam's higher objectives. He emphasized responsibility as a core ethical concept, related both to the need for Muslims to extract meaning from the scriptures beyond the text and to the ethical duty to implement the resulted knowledge into concrete practice, including in social participation.

In conclusion, Brodard argued that Islamic Social Ethics can enrich social participation by fostering a sense of moral responsibility, connecting religious norms to broader ethical purposes, ensuring that Islamic practices advance the *common good*, and encouraging reflective, responsible engagement by Muslim actors within plural societies.

This session opened up important avenues for further research and reflection on the evolving role of religion and community-based welfare in Switzerland and beyond.