

REIMAGINING SOCIAL WORK FROM AN ISLAMIC WORLDVIEW

REIMAGINING SOCIAL WORK FROM AN ISLAMIC WORLDVIEW

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Abstract

With Islamophobia on the rise in Canada, it may reasonably be expected that social work, a seemingly care-oriented profession, would have effective support readily available for the Muslim community. However, rather than the Muslim community experiencing social services as a place where such support can be accessed, their interactions with these services demonstrate the ways that Islamophobia seeps into social work settings amidst discriminatory assumptions about Muslims and a lack of religiously informed care. In response, informed by an Islamic worldview and drawing upon decolonial thought and community-based participatory research principles, this study aims to centre Islamic ways of knowing, being, and doing in considering how mainstream social services and social work practice can most effectively support the Muslim community. Emerging from interviews with five Muslim community leaders and scholars were four key themes: the role of Islam in the lives and well-being of Muslims; anti-Muslim sentiment and the devaluing of Islamic identity in mainstream social work education and practice; the need for Islamically informed care; and reimagining social work from an Islamic worldview. The findings reveal significant challenges for the Muslim community in accessing and receiving effective support from mainstream social services, while also underscoring important considerations for enhanced social work practice with Muslims. Implications and recommendations for the social work profession, social work education, and the Muslim community are discussed, alongside suggestions for future research and action, with an emphasis on the importance of contributions from Islam and Muslims to elicit meaningful change.

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All praise is for Allah, Lord of the worlds, Who has allowed this work to reach its completion, and peace and blessings of Allah be upon His Messenger. Anything good and true in this work is from Allah ‘azza wa jall (to Him belong might and majesty), and any shortcomings and mistakes are from me. If I have inadvertently mentioned something herein which is contrary to the Qur'an and the Sunnah, then the correct view is that which is found in the Qur'an and the Sunnah and anything incorrect should be unreservedly rejected and rectified.
And Allah knows best.

The Prophet Muhammad (sallAllahu ‘alayhi wa sallam - peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said, “Whoever does not thank people has not thanked Allah.”¹

To my mother – Ammi Jee, I am indebted to you for my upbringing. Thank you for all your support, encouragement, and love, and for striving to strengthen my understanding of our religion. May Allah be pleased with you.

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To my Muslim brothers and sisters around the world who are suffering and being persecuted for saying “our Lord is Allah”² – thank you all for setting such powerful examples of what it means to be strong in faith and resilient in the face of injustices and oppression. May Allah give you all strength and victory over those who seek to oppress you, and may He forgive us for our negligence and shortcomings in aiding you.

¹ [Reference: Sunan Abi Dāwūd 4811] Retrieved from <https://www.abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2011/05/29/thanking-people-allah/> (Daily Hadith Online, n.d.-a).

² See: The Qur'an - Surah Al Hajj, Verse 40 [22:40].

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In the name of Allah, the Entirely Merciful, the Especially Merciful

“Indeed, those who have said, "Our Lord is Allah," and then remained on a right course - there will be no fear concerning them, nor will they grieve.

Those are the companions of Paradise, abiding eternally therein as reward for what they used to do.”³

³ The Qur'an - Surah Al Ahqaf, Verses 13-14 [46:13-14] - English translation from Sahih International and retrieved from Quran.com.

Chapter 1: Introduction

As a Muslim, my desire to benefit humanity and my passion for social justice are inspired by my religion and relationship with Allah (God). Islamic principles, values, and beliefs inform every facet of my life and the lives of Muslims around the world. Yet, six years into my social work education, I have come to the saddening realization that my religion, and the ways of knowing, being, and doing which are so integral to my well-being and the well-being of my community tend to be so rarely discussed, let alone utilized, in mainstream social work education, research, and practice in Canada.

To understand the issues that contribute to the experiences of Muslims when interacting with the social work profession, it is necessary to familiarize oneself with the contemporary social, cultural, and political context in Canada, in which Islamophobia is rampant. Dominant discourses “reflect the norms formed by the dominant group within society” (Bishop, 2015; Fook, 1993; Mullaly & West, 2018, as cited in Smith, 2020, p. 28). These are demonstrated in various societal systems and structures, such as laws and the media (Smith, 2020). It has been argued that “dominant Canadian culture” is “rooted in white, neoliberal, Eurocentric colonial belief” (Bell, Sinclair, Carniol, & Baines, 2017; Johner & Maslany, 2011; Mullaly & West, 2018, as cited in Smith, 2020, p. 28).

Regarding Muslims specifically, the mainstream views in Canada have become increasingly negative and anti-Muslim sentiments are demonstrated and on the rise in Canadian systems and structures (Smith, 2020). With the increase in Islamophobia, Islam has been portrayed as “irrational, incompatible with modern civilization, and inherently violent” (Suleiman, 2017, p. 1). These stereotypical and false portrayals and

understandings of Islam have had a devastating impact on the Muslim community. Sadly, one does not need to look far for examples:

“Five Muslim pedestrians deliberately hit by driver, four dead, in alleged hate attack in London, Ont.”

– *The Globe and Mail* June 7, 2021⁴

“‘She was thrown to the ground’: Police investigate attack on Muslim woman in Edmonton”

– *CTV News* June 13, 2021⁵

“‘Islamophobia is real’: Community leaders express shock after threats, arrests at Scarborough, Ont. Mosque”

– *CTV News* June 15, 2021⁶

“Man with knife attacks sisters wearing hijabs outside Edmonton, RCMP say”

– *CBC News* June 24, 2021⁷

“Saskatoon man assaulted, has part of beard cut off in attack motivated by anti-Muslim hate”

– *CBC News* June 25, 2021⁸

“Hamilton police investigating anti-Muslim hate crime in Ancaster, suspect in custody”

– *Global News* July 13, 2021⁹

“Anti-Muslim graffiti in Surrey’s Newton neighbourhood prompts RCMP investigation”

– *CTV News* July 16, 2021¹⁰

⁴ (Freeze, 2021).

⁵ (Lachacz, 2021).

⁶ (Woodward, 2021).

⁷ (“Man with Knife Attacks Sisters”, 2021).

⁸ (Larson, 2021).

⁹ (Polewski, 2021).

¹⁰ (Miljure, 2021).

The above-mentioned incidents all occurred within a six-week period, as this research was taking place. To the over one million Muslims living in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2011), such occurrences are a cause for concern. The effects of anti-Muslim sentiment can be detrimental. Graham et al. (2009) mention there being documented cases of attacks on Muslims, as well as social exclusion and alienation in North America. Additionally, in discussing the impacts of rising Islamophobia and anti-Muslim views on American Muslims, Awaad et al. (2020) highlight the serious consequences “discrimination-based stressors” can have on the mental health of Muslims (p. 75). The current Islamophobic context has been shown to increase anxiety among Muslims, who are apprehensive of being discriminated against or treated poorly (Awaad et al., 2020). Moreover, discrimination has been found to indirectly impact the wellness of Muslims, due to greater levels of depression (Hodge et al, 2016). These are just some of the negative effects discrimination may have on Muslims that must be addressed and challenged to better support the well-being of the community.

In theory, social work is a social-justice oriented profession. Thus, it makes sense that alongside the broader community, social workers should be involved in challenging the issue of Islamophobia and seeking solutions (Smith, 2020). Additionally, in light of the ill-treatment of Muslims, it is necessary to consider social services that are geared towards the Muslim community (Graham et al., 2009). However, the challenges mentioned above may instead be further exacerbated by issues such as stigma, “fear of discrimination” by service providers, and “a lack of culturally and religiously sensitive mental health services”, all of which can act as barriers to Muslims seeking support (Ali

& Awaad, 2018, as cited in Awaad et al., 2020, p. 75). Below, I will further explore the intersections of social work and Islam and how Muslims, particularly in North America, experience social work and social services. In doing so, I will discuss Islamophobia in the social work context, the importance of recognizing the contributions of Islam and Muslims to societal well-being and the significance of utilizing an Islamic worldview and examining well-being from an Islamic perspective, and the centrality of religion to the lives and wellness of Muslims. Finally, I will discuss the objectives of this research project.

Anti-Muslim Sentiments, Islamophobia, and Social Work

Islamophobia has become a commonplace experience for the Muslim community and occurs in multifaceted ways. One of the perhaps more insidious ways in which this issue is experienced by Muslims is through interactions with mainstream social services and social service providers. In reflecting on how to address Islamophobia, there must be a consideration of the pervasiveness of dominant discourses and ideas, and how these can also impact social work and social workers (Smith, 2020). Smith (2020) argues that “Islamophobia exists within the social work profession” (pp. 30-31). Oppression may occur in social work and has also been noted to be present in the social work code of ethics via the presence of “values of society’s dominant groups” (Fine & Teram, 2009, p. 61, as cited in Smith, 2020, p. 36). To better understand this phenomenon, one may reflect upon Barise’s (2005) discussion on the social construction of social work knowledge and skills:

Social work knowledge and skills are socially constructed. Professional social work was initiated in the Western world in the early twentieth century on the basis of a secular, euro-centric worldview (Graham, 2002, 2005). Thus, social work is shaped by the European and North American (hereafter the West) socio-cultural contexts in which it originates (Payne, 1997). (para. 1)

Moreover, it is not uncommon for “cultural imperialism of dominant groups” to occur in the therapeutic relationship (Costa et al., 2012, p. 87, as cited in Smith, 2020, p. 35). For instance, one might consider Suleiman’s (2017) discussion regarding how counselors who are not Muslim may be influenced by portrayals of Islam in the media, potentially impacting their work with young Muslims. Overall, these discussions highlight the potential for the oppression of Muslims to occur within the social work context itself, as well as the necessity for workers to be mindful of this and to actively avoid and challenge it. One way to do so is to recognize the contributions of Islam and Muslims to societal well-being and the significance of utilizing an Islamic worldview and examining well-being from an Islamic perspective, while also considering how these may be reflected in social work education, research, and practice to better support the Muslim community.

Islamic Worldview and Contributions to Wellness

To effectively challenge the vilification of and false narratives regarding Islam and Muslims in society, as well as the widespread implications of this, it is important to recognize the contributions of Islam and Muslims to benefitting humanity. For example,

Suleiman (2020) states “we have a history of contribution, ethics, justice, peace amongst peoples, etc. that originated through Islam”, further going on to mention:

We pay close attention to the systems of justice under the likes of Omar Ibn Al Khattab and Omar Ibn AbdulAzeez, the legacies of institutionalized welfare programs for the benefit of residents and travelers regardless of their claims to faith, and how Islam dealt with a changing world only by changing it for the better. (p. 17)

Moreover, one might also consider Islam’s emphasis on mental health and wellness.

Islam has a legacy of recognizing and stressing the importance of mental health and well-being, including during the time of the Prophet Muhammad (sallAllahu ‘alayhi wa sallam - peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), his companions (may Allah be pleased with them), and Muslim scholars who came after them (Awaad et al., 2021). Recent contributions by Awaad, Elsayed, and Helal (2021) in their paper titled “Holistic Healing: Islam’s Legacy of Mental Health”, document this legacy from the 10th century onwards. Healing centres emerged in various places in the Muslim world and were centrally located in cities so as to be accessible to those who required this support, as well as to encourage Muslims to fulfill the practice of visiting those who are sick, as recommended in Islam (Awaad et al., 2021). In deciding where to build these healing centres, there was also consideration of the “air quality and proximity to natural water sources” (Awaad et al., 2021, p. 11). In these hospitals, a holistic healing framework was utilized, alongside an understanding of the complexity of human beings, and as such a variety of methods were used to treat individuals with mental illnesses (Awaad et al., 2021). When treatment

was completed and people were discharged from these hospitals, they would be given financial support to help with the transition and reintegration process (Awaad et al., 2021). Overall, due to the holistic view on life that is central to an Islamic worldview, Muslim scholars from various disciplines engaged in an interdisciplinary effort to contribute to the field of “‘ilm al-nafs (the study of the self)”, which was “the precursor to the field of psychology” (Awaad et al., 2021, p. 14). As such, Islamic Psychology presented a “holistic model” that “put the heart at the center, and connected to it the mind, body, soul, and emotions” (Awaad et al., 2021, p. 14). To revive the “great Islamic intellectual heritage”, Awaad et al. (2021) suggest that it is necessary to acknowledge it “as one that was deeply committed to mental wellness via its holistic healing framework” (p. 15).

Contemporarily, Awaad et al. (2021) mention how research suggests that there tends to be a lack of utilization of mental health services by Muslims, despite increased risk factors. Among the reasons provided for this is the influence of colonialism and secularism, leading to divisions in the Muslim world and pushing religion out of academia (Awaad et al., 2021). The secular foundations of modern psychology “opposed the fundamentals of an Islamic worldview”, thus cultivating distrust among Muslims (Awaad et al., 2021, p. 13). These issues, as well as other historical forces, led to the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream psychology, causing them to “turn inwards” (Awaad et al., 2021, p. 13). Recognizing and understanding the rich legacy and contributions of Islam in terms of the promotion of societal well-being, as well as some of the reasons why contemporary social services may be underutilized by Muslims, are

important issues to consider when reflecting on how to support the well-being of the Muslim community more effectively.

The aforementioned examples have illustrated some aspects of Islam's emphasis on societal well-being, as well as the importance of considering the potential impacts of excluding Islam and Muslims, and Islamic ways of knowing, being, and doing, from mainstream society and spaces. Echoing this, Suleiman (2020) emphasizes the importance of challenging the notion that "all good ideas originated in Western thought, where so much of what is of benefit to the people actually originated in Islam" (p. 6). He also underlines the significance of supporting Islamically grounded frameworks, in stating: "Naturally, if we don't promote our own frameworks, we risk reinforcing frameworks that are foreign to what can principally be extracted from our faith" (Suleiman, 2020, p. 6). Moreover, the author of a 1997 study exploring the social service behaviour of Muslims in Toronto highlighted the importance of a shift in the epistemological grounding of social service provision for Muslims, speaking about how the Muslim community would desire to "restructure the nature of social service delivery more fundamentally, so that they may conform more precisely to the Islamic world view" (Azmi, 2007, p. 166). Overall, acknowledging the historical and ongoing contributions of Islam to the well-being of not only Muslims, but also to humanity more broadly, lends itself to a better understanding of the significance of an Islamic worldview and of its utilization in social service provision.

The Centrality of Religion to the Lives and Well-Being of Muslims

To support the Muslim community more effectively, it is necessary to understand the centrality of religion to the lives and well-being of Muslims. Islam is a complete way of life. It is central to every decision made and every circumstance handled, and one's relationship with God is of utmost importance. Islam influences every aspect of a Muslim's life, the apparent and the hidden, the public and the private. Moreover, Islam includes certain beliefs, principles, values, and practices; for Muslims, it is important to consistently be striving to adhere to these. At the same time, as Muslims, we recognize Islam as perfect and complete, while acknowledging our own imperfections and the importance of reflecting on them and consistently striving to change and be better. Furthermore, Islam provides guidance as to how to be well, as well as how to support others in being well. Notably, while as Muslims we are targeted for our faith, it is this very faith through which we find solace and strength. For example, Allah says in the Qur'an¹¹ (what may be translated as): "...Unquestionably, by the remembrance of Allah hearts are assured."¹² As Muslims, our faith is central to who we are and how we live our lives. Therefore, it is a responsibility upon social service providers and social service organizations to realize this and to recognize the massive gap that can occur as a result of not doing so.

Demonstrating the impact of religion on the wellness of Muslims, a study conducted with 3,888 Muslims around the world found that "religiosity has a profound positive effect on the lives of Muslims worldwide", with Islamic religiosity being found

¹¹ Refer to pp. 19-21 of this document for more information about the Qur'an.

¹² The Qur'an - Surah Ar-Ra'd, Verse 28 [13:28] - English translation from Sahih International and retrieved from Quran.com.

to be “related to higher life satisfaction, a greater sense of purpose in life, and overall well-being”, as well as “lower levels of religious struggles and doubts, depression, and anxiety” (Desouky & Umarji, n.d., p. 4). Moreover, literature regarding the internalization of Islamophobia among Muslim youth speaks about how the formation of “a strong identity based on deep conviction and confidence can lead to a healthier young Muslim individual” who “feels valued and responsible for contributing to society as a whole” (Suleiman, 2017, p. 11). Furthermore, research shows that while discrimination can indirectly negatively impact the wellness of Muslims due to greater levels of depression, spirituality has a direct effect on depression and wellness, with spirituality having a positive impact on the health and well-being of Muslims (Hodge et al., 2016). Hence, not only is the necessity to address discrimination against Muslims emphasized as a way of promoting the well-being of the community, but the vital role of spirituality in supporting the well-being of Muslims has also been highlighted (Hodge et al., 2016). Therefore, in addition to finding ways to challenging discrimination towards Muslims, the social work profession can also support the wellness of the community by recognizing the importance of religion in the lives of Muslims and demonstrating this in services and practice.

To effectively support the Muslim community in ways that are reflective of the central role that religion plays in the lives and well-being of Muslims, social work’s knowledge base must be questioned and adjusted. Padela et al. (2012) speak about how the American Muslim community is united through “a shared religious tradition that shapes its members’ worldviews and informs their behaviors” (p. 847). Thus, for Muslims, Islamic values are “an important alternative entry point” for how health, health

practices, and choices are understood (Padela et al., 2012, p. 847). Furthermore, “the role of Islam in providing appropriate services to Muslim clients” has been proven in social work, as well as other helping professions (Al-Shahri, 2002; El-Amin and Nadir, 2014; Kennedy et al., 2010; Lawrence and Rozmus, 2001; Sauerheber et al., 2014, as cited in Abdullah, 2016, p. 387). There is evidence to suggest that intervention that is religiously and culturally sensitive increases the effectiveness of social service provision (Abdullah, 2014; Hodge, 2005, as cited in Abdullah, 2016). For example, Islamic approaches to addressing mental health concerns have been found to be effective in handling stressful experiences (Abu-Ras et al., 2008). Moreover, familiarity with Islamic values has been noted to aid “social worker interventions” (Al-Krenawi, 2016, as cited in Yusof et al., 2020, p. 16). One might also consider the concept of “localization” in social work, which is an approach that involves the adaptation of knowledge “to the local circumstances of culture, community, and values” (Ragab, 1995; Al-Krenawi and Graham, 1996a, 1996b, 1997a, 1997b, 1999a, 1999b; Antweiler, 1998, as cited in Graham et al., 2009, p. 544). Thus, social work theory and knowledge is changed to work with various groups and to address their needs more suitably (Graham et al., 2008). Instead of solely focusing on adjusting the conduct of workers, a localization approach stresses the importance of considering and altering social work’s “knowledge base” (Graham et al. 2008, p. 546). In working with the Muslim community in particular, a localization approach involves an increased knowledge of Islam to support more sensitive social work (Graham et al., 2008). Therefore, to provide appropriate and effective support and care to Muslims, it is necessary to understand Islamic ideas around well-being and adjust social work

accordingly, rather than the other way around. Overall, it is important for social workers to listen to the perspectives of the Muslim community regarding wellness and healing, in order to better understand the Islamic worldview and provide support within it.

In reflecting upon the well-being of the Muslim community, it is important to consider the strengths and existing knowledge, practices, and resources of the Muslim community which can be leveraged to more effectively support the health and wellness of Muslims. A community-based participatory research study conducted by Padela et al. (2012) found the views of the Muslim research participants to be “God-centric” (p. 846). As such, healing is sought from God directly, through means such as salah (prayer), du’aa (supplication), and recitation of the Qur’an (Padela et al., 2012). Additionally, the participants in the above-mentioned study also acknowledged that God can also cure people indirectly through “human agents”, such as imams, family and friends, health care workers, and the community (Padela et al., 2012, p. 853). Through understanding these “key agents in healing”, one can ascertain various approaches through which community health may be improved (Padela et al., 2012, p. 846). For example, the importance of collaboration between Muslim leaders and scholars and those engaging in social services with the Muslim community has been highlighted in the literature. Muslim scholars tend to be “amongst the first to notice problems in their community” (Helmus, York, & Chalk, 2013; Rath, Penninx, Groenendijk, & Meyer, 1999, as cited in Yusof et al., 2020, p. 16). Muslim scholars have also been described as playing an important role as “community mental health responders” (Ali et al., 2005, as cited in Yusof et al., 2020, p. 16). Moreover, imams can and do play an important role in supporting the Muslim

community. Padela et al. (2012) discuss data that demonstrates the contributions imams and mosques can make to health improvement. For instance, collaborating with imams can aid in the sharing of messages regarding health care, within an Islamic framework (Padela et al. 2012). Imams may also be able to help navigate potential challenges and gaps in the relationships between service providers and the Muslim community (Padela et al., 2012). Furthermore, Abu-Ras et al. (2008) highlight the significance of building connections between service organizations and “faith and community-based programs and organizations” to support the mental well-being of the Muslim community (p. 169). In summation, these are some of the existing supports, strengths, and practices within the Muslim community which should be recognized as making important contributions to the wellness of Muslims.

The Research Objectives

The research and literature discussed above have demonstrated how Islamophobia has negatively impacted the well-being of the Muslim community and that one of the ways in which Islamophobia manifests in the lives of Muslims is through interactions with mainstream social services and social service providers. Importantly, the literature suggests that a way to counter these issues is to provide support to the Muslim community in ways that acknowledge the integral role of Islam in the lives of Muslims and Islam’s contributions to societal well-being, through social work practice that is informed by an Islamic worldview and is grounded in Islamic beliefs, principles, and values.

This research project involves interviewing Muslim community leaders and scholars in Canada to learn about their views on mainstream social services and social work practice, particularly in the context of the Muslim community. Through this research, I am interested in learning about how leaders and scholars in the Muslim community understand the social support needs of the Muslim community, the kind of support they provide, and how mainstream social services and social work practices can most effectively support members of the Muslim community. This research aims to explore barriers and facilitators for the Muslim community in accessing and/or receiving support from mainstream social services, and to identify principles of an Islamically informed framework for social work practice with Muslims. Moreover, the important role of Muslim community leaders in supporting the well-being of the community has been highlighted in the literature. I believe that Muslim community leaders and scholars, who make up the participants in this research study, will be able to provide crucial insights into contemporary realities of Muslims living in Canada. The research positions these leaders and scholars as people whose contributions should be valued in considering how social work can be practiced more effectively with the Muslim community.

This research is taking place at a critical time, in which anti-Muslim sentiments are on the rise. It behooves the social work profession to understand the current context and address this social ill, while also appropriately and effectively supporting the well-being of a community that is increasingly marginalized in Canadian society. This thesis presents an opportunity to explore these issues in ways that are informed by and centre an Islamic worldview. Overall, this research aims to further explore the intersections of

Islam and social work, in the hopes that perhaps this may lead to an enhanced understanding of how the social work profession may better support the well-being of the Muslim community in Canada, and beyond.

Jubayr ibn Mut’am reported: We were with the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, and he said,

“Do you not bear witness that there is no God but Allah without any partner, that I am the messenger of Allah, and that the Quran has come from Allah?”

We said, “Of course.” The Prophet said,

“Then rejoice, for one end of this Quran is in the hand of Allah and the other is in your hands, so hold fast to it. Verily, you will never be ruined or led astray ever again.”¹³

¹³ [Reference: Musnad al-Bazzār 3421] Retrieved from: <https://www.abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2016/12/05/hold-fast-to-the-quran/> (Daily Hadith Online, n.d.-b).

Chapter 2: Methodology

The theoretical and methodological approaches utilized in this research project have been selected to centre Islamic ways of knowing, being, and doing. To achieve this aim, this research is informed by an Islamic worldview and draws upon decolonial thought. In line with this theoretical framework, this research also draws upon community-based participatory research (CBPR) principles. Together, this theoretical and methodological framework presents an opportunity to challenge dominant ways of knowing, being, and doing, while privileging the knowledge and lived experiences of the Muslim community.

Theoretical Framework

Islamic Worldview

In conducting this research and writing this thesis, it has been my hope that Islamic ways of knowing, being, and doing, or in other words, an Islamic worldview, may be centred. The centrality of Islam to the lives and well-being of Muslims has previously been highlighted, and so it follows that this should be kept at the forefront in both the process and content of this work. Hence, when reflecting on the methodology of this project, including the theoretical and methodological approach, as well as the methods, it was important for me to consider how this might be done. My aim was to try my best to conduct this work in the same way Muslims must live their lives - according to the Qur'an and the Sunnah. In “Introduction to I’jāz al-Qur’ān, Part 1: The Miraculous Nature of the Qur’an”, Hani (2020) describes the Qur’an as follows:

The Qur'an is the Arabic kalām (Speech) of Allah, which He revealed to Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in wording and meaning, which has been preserved in the muṣḥaf (physical written copy), has reached us by means of authentic transmissions, and is a challenge to mankind to produce something similar to it.² Muslims believe that the Qur'an was revealed from God, the One Creator of the universe and all that it contains, through His Angel Gabriel to Muhammad, the last messenger and prophet of God to mankind, in a long line of messengers before him, including Noah, Abraham, David, Moses, and Jesus, peace be upon them.

The Qur'an is comprised of many āyāt (singular: āyah), or “verses,” and in the Qur'anic context an āyah refers to a “sign” of God in this world, such as signs of His Being and Power, signs in nature,³ signs from history,⁴ or divine revelation as a sign (“when our signs are recited...”⁵).⁶ Thus, to Muslims, the Qur'an is not only the Speech of God, but it is a sign that is perfect, preserved, memorized on an unmatched scale, miraculous in its nature, impossible to imitate, universally beneficial for all societies, impactful on the heart and soul, contains no errors or contradictions, contains knowledge of the unseen world, predicted matters of the future, described undiscovered matters of the natural world, and is the final miracle and message of God to mankind until the Day of Resurrection. (p. 4)^{14,15}

Furthermore, Hadith and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) refer to “the sayings, deeds, and approvals accurately narrated from

¹⁴ From “*Introduction to I'jāz al-Qur'ān: The Miraculous Nature of the Qur'an*” by Sh. Suleiman Hani, 2020, Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research.

¹⁵ For information and references related to the footnotes in this quote see the source essay at: <https://yaqeeninstitute.ca/read/paper/introduction-to-ijaz-al-quran-the-miraculous-nature-of-the-quran>.

the Prophet” (Darussalam Research Division, 2003, p. 10). Holding on to the Qur’an and the Sunnah is emphasized in Islam. The Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said, “I have left you with two matters which will never lead you astray, as long as you hold to them: the Book of Allah and the Sunnah of his Prophet.”¹⁶ In applying any of the concepts, approaches, and methods mentioned henceforth, an attempt has been made to utilize and build upon what can benefit the research and is supportive of the overall vision of centring an Islamic worldview, while trying to ensure that what is utilized does not contradict the Qur'an and the Sunnah in any way.

Decolonial Thought

Decolonial thought does not refer to a specific theoretical school, but instead highlights diverse perspectives that all view coloniality as an important issue and decolonization as an essential and ongoing task (Maldonado-Torres, 2011). Fundamentally, decolonial thought involves the rejection of the perceived superiority of Western epistemology. It also considers how knowledge is produced, particularly the Eurocentricity of knowledge production, and seeks to instead acknowledge and centre alternative epistemologies. Below, I will discuss some basic assumptions behind decolonial thought and consider its potential implications for this research.

To understand decolonial thought, it is important to first understand the concept of coloniality. Coloniality, in the words of Maldonado-Torres (2007), refers to:

Long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well

¹⁶ [Reference: Al-Muwatta’ 1661] Retrieved from: <https://www.abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2012/12/19/left-you-with-kitab-sunnah/> (Daily Hadith Online, n.d.-c).

beyond the strict limits of colonial administration. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria of academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breath coloniality all the time and everyday. (p. 243)

This quote emphasizes a key aspect of decolonial thought, which is the notion of the coloniality of power. First articulated by Aníbal Quijano, the “coloniality of power” refers to the continuation of the logics of colonialism beyond the end of formal colonial administrations (Bhambra, 2014, p. 129; Lentin, 2019). Moreover, colonization became the basis for what would become “modern identity”, rooted in “world capitalism and a system of domination structured around the idea of race” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 244). Thus, ideas of modernity are seen as having developed under the conditions of colonialism (Bhambra, 2014). From a decolonial lens, coloniality and modernity have been viewed as inseparable, as modernity, also described as a “coloniality of knowledge”, is implicated in Europe’s colonial domination (Bhambra, 2014, pp. 129-130). Modernity and coloniality go hand in hand, with modernity being a product of coloniality, while also perpetuating coloniality through its discourses (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Reflecting on this, one might consider how the perceived dominance of Western thought has been utilized to legitimize and perpetuate colonization and the subjugation of people around the world.

Decolonial inquiry challenges the perceived superiority and universality of Western ways of thinking. It recognizes that the coloniality of power has led to the

subordination of not only certain groups of people considered racially and ethnically inferior, but also to the subordination of their knowledge (Bhambra, 2014). When thinking about Islam and Islamophobia in particular, a decolonial perspective may consider Islamophobia as being rooted in the knowledge production and perceived dominance of the West (Grosfoguel, 2010). Colonial expansion is seen as a part of “epistemicide” and “religiouscide”, as in the destruction of the ways of thinking, living, being, and knowing of “colonial subjects” (Grosfoguel, 2010, p. 36). Modern/colonial logic presents Western ways of knowing as legitimate, while Islam is considered unable to compare to the “superiority of Western values in that it lacks individuality, rationality and science” (Grosfoguel, 2010, p. 33). The portrayal of Islamic thought as inferior to Western thought results in Muslims being seen as people who can only contribute to important conversations if they “stop thinking as Muslims” (Grosfoguel, 2010, p. 37). Hence, while Western epistemology may seek to exclude and subjugate an Islamic worldview, a decolonial approach involves centring it.

Decolonial approaches advocate for epistemic decolonization as a way to address the harms of modernity/coloniality and challenge the dominance of Western thought. “Epistemic decolonization” is seen as involving a recognition of where knowledge is located, both geographically and politically, while also considering those knowledges that have been rejected through the dominance of others (Bhambra, 2014, p. 134). A decolonial approach thus questions what is known and how it is known according to the geopolitical context (Bhambra, 2014). Furthermore, epistemic decolonization involves “learning to unlearn” (Mignolo, 2007, p. 485). Mignolo (2007) speaks about “delinking”,

which involves challenging the universality of Western epistemology and recognizing its limitations, as well as centring other ways of knowing, being, and doing, thus leading to a “de-colonial epistemic shift” (p. 453). Attention is also given to recovering pre-colonial histories to consider alternative ways of being, as well as methods to resist modernity/coloniality (Bhambra, 2014). A decolonial approach recognizes that there is knowledge present in colonized societies that has not been meaningfully utilized or valued in mainstream society (Connell, 2016). Thus, decolonial inquiry acknowledges and pays attention to alternative worldviews in the process of resisting modernity/coloniality and the supremacy of Western knowledge.

Drawing on decolonial thought in this research speaks to the importance of exploring the Eurocentricity of dominant ways of knowing, being, and doing and how these are reflected in mainstream social work practice, particularly with the Muslim community. Moreover, it contributes to a nuanced examination of the effectiveness, or lack thereof, of using mainstream social work approaches with Muslims. Decolonial thought highlights modernity/coloniality and the ongoing presence and maintenance of colonial logics in our everyday lives. This recognition further positions this research to critically examine the factors that shape mainstream social work practice and inform the experiences of Muslims engaging with social services. Through a decolonial lens, there is an implication that social work theory and practice are not neutral, but rather that they are rooted in a specific, Eurocentric worldview. Hence, decolonial thought presents an opportunity to problematize the utilization of Western thought as the dominant knowledge base of social work. When considering social work with Muslims in

particular, one might explore how assumptions of the universal applicability of Western epistemology may be reflected in the interactions of the Muslim community with mainstream social work practices. Moreover, it is also important to consider how the exclusion of Islamic ways of knowing, being, and doing from mainstream social work settings may be impacting the ability of the Muslim community to be effectively supported in these spaces. Therefore, by positioning this research in decolonial thought, one may analyze how colonial logics might influence mainstream social services and the implications of this for Muslims seeking their support.

Furthermore, decolonial thought presents a method for not only examining and understanding how modernity/coloniality shape people's lived experiences, but also for how to engage in resistance and social change. Through this research, I hope to engage in a process of 'epistemic decolonization' and 'delinking', as I question where social work knowledge is located and whose ways of knowing are included in or excluded from mainstream social work practice. There are valuable ways in which the well-being of the Muslim community, and society more broadly, is supported and promoted within Islamic contexts and through an Islamic worldview. Decolonial thought's emphasis on acknowledging alternative epistemologies lends itself well to an exploration of what a more effective framework of social work education and practice, rooted in an Islamic worldview, may look like and how it may be developed, in order to better support the well-being of Muslims in mainstream social work settings. Thus, a decolonial approach to this research involves challenging what is considered valid and universal knowledge by

decentring Western epistemology and recognizing its limitations, while instead centring and valuing Islamic ways of knowing, being, and doing.

Methodological Approach: Community-Based Participatory Research

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is a research approach that involves collaboration between and equitable involvement of various stakeholders, including community members and researchers, in the research process, in order to better acknowledge and utilize the strengths, knowledge, and contributions of those involved (Collins et al., 2018). It has been described as a collaborative and “explicitly different epistemological orientation to research”, rather than just a research method (Jacobson & Rugely, 2007, pp. 22, 24). Notably, CBPR seeks to conduct research with communities, rather than on them (Killawi et al., 2015). It positions communities as partners who should be meaningfully engaged in the research process, recognizing they are the ones who are most impacted by the matters being researched (Jacobson & Rugely, 2007). Through this research approach, power is to be shared with people who tend to be the “objects of research” (Durham University, 2011, p. 4). Moreover, the community is encouraged to take part in “the co-construction of knowledge” and in influencing the research priorities (Ali & Awaad, 2019, p. 382). Thus, the knowledge of the community, rather than solely of academic researchers, is seen as valuable (University of Maryland Edward Ginsberg Centre, n.d., as cited in Greene & Chambers, 2011). Significantly, a key aim of CBPR is to utilize knowledge and action to create positive and sustainable social change (Collins et al., 2018). Thus, CBPR is an alternative to traditional research

processes, that encourages community participation in ways that are empowering, that value community knowledge and contributions, and that lead to positive change.

In considering the potential application and advantages of CBPR with the Muslim community, one might reflect upon how this may be a decolonial approach to the research itself, in that it challenges status quo research approaches and encourages the valuing of community knowledge. Hence, utilizing aspects of CBPR with the Muslim community may present a means for Islamic ways of knowing, being, and doing to be acknowledged, appreciated, and utilized in the research process. For a community that is at times marginalized, vilified, and misunderstood, this may present a significant and necessary opportunity for more socially just research. Fine and Torre (2006) discuss how CBPR challenges the narrow way of defining valid knowledge and research typically found in academia and instead opens up space for “gathering up, legitimating and broadcasting subjugated knowledges” (p. 261). Hence, particularly when thinking about the increasing marginalization and denigration of Islam and Muslims, CBPR may serve as a means for the ways and voice of the Muslim community to be centred and valued in the research process and for ‘thinking as Muslim’¹⁷ to be seen as a strength, rather than a barrier, to the research.

Moreover, when further reflecting on the potential utilization and benefits of CBPR with the Muslim community, one might consider the emphasis in CBPR on centring the community and the community’s needs throughout the research process, rather than attempting to apply a one-size-fits-all approach. To engage in effective

¹⁷ See the “Decolonial Thought” section of this chapter, p. 23, or Grosfoguel, 2010, p. 37.

research with the Muslim community, I believe that considering community needs, experiences, and context is essential. Ali and Awaad (2019) speak about how “community engagement strategies” allow the community to “participate in designing interventions that are sensitive to their social, cultural, and political contexts” (p. 380). This highlights the significance of participatory approaches to research with communities, in that community involvement in the research process encourages the acknowledgement and addressing of the unique context and needs of the community when engaging in research, as well as the broader context which may have contributed to issues the community may be experiencing.

Furthermore, I believe that the potential to adjust research approaches based on the community is a strength of and testament to the flexibility of CBPR and may be leveraged to engage in research that is of greater benefit to the Muslim community. In the context of research with the Muslim community, while CBPR has the ability to centre the ways of knowing, being, and doing of the Muslim community during the research, in order to be more applicable, appropriate, and meaningful for the community, one may consider how the CBPR process itself can be informed by Islamic principles and practices. One of the ways in which this was done in this research project was through considering and implementing the practice of shura. Shura refers to consultation and involves reaching out to and conferring with others in the decision-making process. Moreover, shura is considered crucial for unity and as a means of building trust and working together to engage in better decision making. Shura is referred to in various places in the Qur'an. For example, God says (what may be translated as): “...and consult

them in the matter”.¹⁸ In the tafsir (Qur’anic exegesis) of this verse by Ibn Kathir (may Allah have mercy on him), there is mention of how the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) used to seek the advice of his companions regarding various matters.¹⁹ Thus, shura is an important aspect of the decision-making process in Islam and is something which Muslims are encouraged to do through the Qur’an and through the example of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). In terms of how to incorporate shura into the research process, I believe it should be a component of decision making before, during, and after research is conducted. Thus, engaging in shura can be a significant way for community members to be involved in various aspects and phases of a research project.

In summary, CBPR may play a decolonizing role by challenging the perceived superiority of certain types of knowledge and research and aspects of it may be used to engage in more socially just and equitable research with the Muslim community. Moreover, it has the potential to centre Islamic ways of knowing, being, and doing in research and to recognize the strengths and expertise present within the community and in the worldview that is central to the community’s way of life. As such, CBPR seems to coincide well with decolonial thought and similarly reflects the vision of this research to centre an Islamic worldview. Due to the time constraints of this research project, it was not within its scope to develop and engage in a full-fledged CBPR research project. However, there are some aspects of CBPR that have been incorporated in this research, as mentioned, and as will also be discussed further below.

¹⁸ The Qur’an - Surah Ali ‘Imran, Verse 159 [3:159] - English translation from Sahih International and retrieved from Quran.com.

¹⁹ English translation of Tafsir Ibn Kathir reviewed on QTafsir.com.

Research Methods

Shura

In this research project, shura was done with members of the Muslim community at multiple stages for various matters, including considering the research topic, exploring the research methodology, exploring resources and literature, and thinking about a variety of other issues related to the research. Furthermore, I would consider the data collection process itself a form of shura; for instance, through this process, Muslim community leaders and scholars were consulted regarding their views on how mainstream social services and social work practice can most effectively support the Muslim community. Moreover, participants were also given the choice to engage in member checking, which functioned as a method of consultative data review and analysis. Additionally, research participants have also been invited to provide their feedback on a draft of a community report that will be created as part of the data dissemination and knowledge mobilization process. Going forward, I also hope to further consult with community members regarding how the research findings may be shared and operationalized. Thus, shura with members of the Muslim community has been and continues to be a critical aspect of this research.

Qualitative Method

For this research project, I wanted to hear directly from Muslim community leaders and scholars who have significant experience working with and supporting the Muslim community in Canada. To do so, I decided to utilize a qualitative research approach. While not necessarily easy to define, qualitative research can refer to “a

plethora of inventive and empathic research approaches to getting to grips with the qualities of things and of life in all their richness and vibrancy” (Mason, 2017, p. ix). Qualitative methods are thought to deliver “a ‘deeper’ understanding of social phenomena than would be obtained from purely quantitative methods” (Gill et al., 2008, p. 292). As part of this study, I engaged in the qualitative research process in the form of individual semi-structured interviews with Muslim community leaders and scholars. I believed it was of significance to consider the knowledge and experience of these individuals, not only regarding the experiences of the Muslim community, but also on how to effectively support the community. As people who support the Muslim community in a multitude of ways, while understanding and being informed by an Islamic worldview, I felt they could offer valuable insights. I also think that deciding to speak to Muslim community scholars and leaders and acknowledging the importance of their contributions, knowledge, and experience was itself a way to disrupt notions of dominance and expertise in status quo social work. Thus, this research has involved a valuing of Islamic ways of knowing, being, and doing throughout the research, including in the recruitment and data collection processes.

Recruitment

After receiving ethics clearance from McMaster’s Research Ethics Board (MREB), I began approaching Muslim community leaders and scholars regarding their participation in the research study. I sought out Muslim community leaders and scholars who are engaged with the community in various ways and settings, in order to get a multiplicity of perspectives. The inclusion criteria included: a leader and/or scholar in the

Muslim community who has experience working with and supporting Muslims in Canada, as well as a demonstrated history of community engagement and providing support to community members. Prior to recruitment, I did web-based research to explore and consider people to recruit and, as a member of the Muslim community, garnered my own knowledge of well-known scholars, leaders, and people in the Muslim community to support me with recruitment. Once I had created a list of potential research participants based on the inclusion criteria, I began the recruitment process.

Recruitment strategies included contacting potential participants via email, phone, and/or sharing the recruitment poster through various communication mediums. Furthermore, the recruitment poster was also shared with people in the Muslim community to share with contacts they felt may be well-suited to participate in the research. When a potential participant responded to recruitment communication expressing interest in participating and/or seeking additional information, the Letter of Information and Consent and the Interview Guide were sent to them. Upon agreeing to participate in the study, the community leaders and scholars were requested to share their availability and virtual interviews were scheduled accordingly.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews are a form of data collection that involves key questions which outline the area of exploration, while also leaving space for both those being interviewed and those interviewing to “diverge in order to pursue an idea or response in more detail” (Gill et al., 2008, p. 291). This approach can be helpful as it gives research participants some idea of what to discuss, while its flexibility also “allows

for the discovery or elaboration of information that is important to participants but may not have previously been thought of as pertinent by the research team” (Gill et al., 2008, p. 291). For this study, participants were invited to participate in approximately 60 to 90 minute-long semi-structured interviews via telephone or Zoom. During the interviews, I asked the Muslim community leaders and scholars who participated questions exploring areas such as: the ways in which they support members of the Muslim community, their views on mainstream social services and mainstream social work practice, particularly in the context of the Muslim community, their thoughts on reimagining social work from an Islamic worldview, and their recommendations for how mainstream social work agencies and social work practices more broadly can most effectively support the Muslim community.

Data Analysis

I used thematic analysis as my approach to understanding and interpreting the interview recordings and transcripts. The approach utilized to analyze the interview data in this study echoes aspects of thematic analysis as described by Ryan and Bernard (2003). Ryan and Bernard (2003) describe techniques for “theme identification” in qualitative research (p. 85). Thematic analysis is a process that involves transcribing the interviews and reviewing the text multiple times (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). This was an important initial step, particularly as it was important for me to further familiarize myself with the data. Moreover, as I reviewed the data from this study, I examined what participants had said and highlighted the transcripts to identify expressions and themes in the data. I identified themes through methods such as exploration of recurring ideas,

phrases, and words (repetition), as well as the use of Islamic terminology (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Upon identifying overarching themes that were emerging, I applied the “cutting and sorting” processing technique to arrange similar quotes together based on these themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 94). Then, as I reviewed and examined the sorted data, I commented on the transcript and made notes regarding the themes and sub-themes, helping to further refine the themes and explore the relationships among them. Identifying and refining the themes, as well as the ensuing exploration and interpretation of the themes and connections between them, contributed to a thorough examination of the research data and consideration of what conclusions could be drawn.

Member Checking

Power dynamics exist even in participatory research, and it is important to consider ways of including community members in every aspect of the research process, including data analysis. Data analysis contributes to the power that researchers have during the research process and tends to be “one of the last areas to be opened up to participatory techniques” in participatory research relationships between academics and community members (Jackson, 2008, p. 162). While there are various methods that have been suggested for engaging community members in data analysis, for this project I chose to incorporate member checking into the research process. I asked the community leaders and scholars who participated in this study if they would like to review their own interview transcripts, and if so to mention the best way to contact them to coordinate this. Member checking was an opportunity for participants to mention if there was something they wanted to be removed from their interview data, to elaborate upon or clarify

something that was said, to add something which was not discussed, to discuss findings and emerging themes, and so on. They could also mention any data which may identify them and that should thus be anonymized or deleted before being included in the research project. As the Muslim community is increasingly misunderstood and negatively portrayed, I felt that participants having the option to participate in this process was important. Additionally, it was a valuable opportunity for participants and I to engage in consultative data review and analysis.

Reflexivity

I believe that being a member of the community at the centre of the research presented a significant opportunity for strong engagement, as there was already a sense of connection, commonality, and understanding of the community context, needs, and worldview. Having said this, engaging in research with my own community also raised questions around how to best participate in this work while being a member of the community, as well as a researcher. It was important to consider what it meant for me to engage in this research as a Muslim, and also as a student and a researcher in a field that has at times perpetuated, rather than adequately resolved, the oppression of those who are most marginalized in society. Overall, these considerations left me with questions which had to be thoughtfully explored. These included: What potential opportunities and challenges might I have been bringing with me into this research? How might these impact my research engagement with the community? What were the ethical considerations that needed to be explored and addressed, and what might these mean for the Muslim community, for the research, and for me as both a community member and

researcher? These considerations further enhanced the sense of responsibility and accountability I felt to do the research in ways that not only avoid harming the community, but that also benefit it.

Ethics

This study received ethics clearance from the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB). The Muslim community leaders and scholars who participated in this study did so confidentially and steps have been taken to protect their identities. Data was stored in an encrypted file on a password-protected computer. Additionally, research participants' names, as well as names of or references to individuals, organizations, and/or places that could identify participants were anonymized in the transcripts. A general overview regarding some of the roles and areas of engagement of all participants has been shared, rather than providing specific details about the positions and roles of each participant separately. However, it is important to note that people are sometimes identifiable through the stories they tell. Particularly since they are known leaders in the Muslim community, participants were cautioned that others may be able to identify them based on references they make and stories they may share, and to please keep this in mind when deciding what to share. Additionally, research participants were given the opportunity to partake in the member checking process, during which they could mention any data which may identify them and that should thus be anonymized or deleted before the data was included in the research project.

Abdullah ibn Amr reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said,

“The merciful will be shown mercy by the Most Merciful.

Be merciful to those on the earth and the One in the heavens will have mercy upon you.”²⁰

²⁰ [Reference: Sunan al-Tirmidhī 1924] Retrieved from <https://www.abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2010/11/16/irhamu-man-fil-ard/> (Daily Hadith Online, n.d.-d).

Chapter 3: Findings

Participants

Five Muslim community leaders and/or scholars, each with extensive experience supporting the Muslim community in Canada, participated in this study. All of the participants have experience engaging with the Muslim community in large urban population centres in Canada. The settings in which participants have provided support include, but are not limited to, mosques, schools, hospitals, prisons, and post-secondary institutions. Some of their roles include supporting the community as imams, as educators, and through holding various other roles in Islamic organizations, including in executive and educational positions. Among participants were also individuals who have experience in the health care field, including mental health care and mental health related research. Moreover, the Muslim community leaders and scholars who participated in this study have experience supporting the Muslim community through services including, but not limited to: providing religious education, individual and family consultations and counseling, mentorship, grief and bereavement support, delivering lectures and workshops on numerous areas of importance to the community, offering diversity and sensitivity training to organizations, engaging in community education and awareness raising efforts, and connecting with and advocating to various organizations and services in order to better support the Muslim community. Other identifying information has been kept confidential to protect the anonymity of the research participants.

Findings

In my analysis of the interviews, four key themes emerged: 1) the role of Islam in the lives and well-being of Muslims; 2) anti-Muslim sentiment and the devaluing of Islamic identity in mainstream social work education and practice; 3) the need for Islamically informed care; and 4) reimagining social work from an Islamic worldview.

Theme 1: The Role of Islam in the Lives and Well-Being of Muslims

It is important to first highlight the role of Islam in the lives and well-being of Muslims, as this lays the foundation from which to understand the concerns of the community leaders and scholars who participated in the study and the needs identified by them and the people they serve. It also provides context for their recommendations for how to address these concerns and needs.

All five of the community leaders and scholars who were interviewed underscored the importance of recognizing the centrality of Islam in the lives and well-being of Muslims to support the community effectively, while simultaneously demonstrating the possible implications of this recognition being absent from social work approaches with the Muslim community. For example, one participant explained the role of the Mosque and the activities that take place in it as contributing to the well-being of the community:

So, the Mosque in general plays a great role in the mental health and the well-being of the community.

The participant went on to mention some of the programs and services at the Mosque, such as prayers, lectures, sermons, and classes and activities for children, while also highlighting the importance of such things for Muslims and the role of Islam in how challenges are addressed, stating:

...They are an integral part of who we are and how we cope with negativity and with challenges and difficult times, including the recent rise in Islamophobia and hate against Islam and Muslims.

The participant's discussion underlines the critical and numerous functions that mosques play. Echoing this participant, another participant spoke about how people may cope with challenges they are experiencing, through religion:

And a lot of the times people are coping through mental health issues, through religion, and so they don't know how that can be integrated or that can go side-in-side with mainstream treatment.

By way of example, this participant spoke about a support group for people experiencing mental health concerns such as depression or anxiety. She stated:

Now within that support group, for a lot of Muslim patients maybe a way of coping will be spirituality. But spirituality is not a component or it's not an aspect that is discussed within these support groups. A person may very much only be able to cope and has only been coping so far with their mental health through spirituality.

The participant went on to question how then this individual would feel comfortable and benefit from this service. Through this example, the participant illustrated the potential consequences of not recognizing the integral role of Islam in the lives and well-being of Muslims, including as a way of healing, coping, and dealing with challenges in one's life.

Furthermore, one of the participants noted a preference among Muslims to reach out to people from the Muslim community for support, further highlighting the significance of Islam in Muslims' lives, stating:

I can say from my experience that many Muslims that I work with, they generally prefer to speak with a Muslim mental health or health care professional when dealing with any particular issue, because their Muslim identity is that important.

He also mentioned that he thinks "the problem that many of our mainstream organizations have is that they see the Muslim identity as being like any other identity", while Muslims

are “very sensitive about their spiritual tradition, like that's at the root of it. Being Muslim is not a cultural matter, it really is much bigger than that, so a lot of Muslims are very hesitant because of that”. The participant also spoke about how “matters of faithfulness” are very important to Muslims seeking support, in whatever issue is being experienced. Later, he also mentioned that “matters of faithfulness are not taken seriously by these institutions” and that “religious belief in that which is considered sacred by the Muslim community is not taken seriously”. The participant also went on to highlight how Islam is a complete way of life and its role in every aspect of a Muslim’s life:

When people think about traditional practice of religion, they’re thinking about orthodoxy. Well, Islam is not only an orthodoxy but it's an orthopraxy, that there are certain things that we do as Muslims. It's not only in the head and the heart, but our religion manifests in the body, the way we relate to each other, the way the family is structured, the type of education we want for our children and young adults. So, it is an all-encompassing way of life. That's not simply a cliché for Muslims, it actually is a way of life, and it impacts every area of human activity, that includes the family, the way we relate to our children, matters of authority within the home, how we eat, what we can consume, our attitude towards drugs and alcohol, all of these things relate to Islam and relate to observant, faithful Muslim practice.

This participant has underscored the significance of understanding the all-encompassing role of Islam in the lives of Muslims. Moreover, in stating that “being Muslim is not a cultural matter, it really is much bigger than that”, the participant echoed other participants in emphasizing the importance of understanding the relationship between religion and culture for the Muslim community. As demonstrated in this section, Islam has a central role in Muslims’ lives. Thus, while appreciating the cultural diversity in the Muslim community is important, it is necessary to be mindful and informed of the

difference between religion and culture, and of the integral, unifying, and superseding role of Islam.

Overall, through these discussions, the participants emphasized the importance of providing support to the community in ways that recognize and value the integral role of Islam in the lives and well-being of Muslims; a type of support that, as the findings will demonstrate, seems to be lacking in mainstream social services and social work practice.

Theme 2: Anti-Muslim Sentiment and the Devaluing of Islamic Identity in Mainstream Social Work Education and Practice

The community leaders and scholars who participated in this study spoke about various challenges experienced by the Muslim community, including issues around belonging, safety, prejudices, biases, and stereotypes. A recurring theme discussed among participants in considering the experiences of Muslims in mainstream social services and social work practice was that of anti-Muslim sentiment and the devaluing of Islamic identity.

Participants highlighted the importance of considering the prevalence and widespread implications of anti-Muslim sentiment in society, including for the social work profession. One participant mentioned how the challenges discussed relating to mainstream social work may be there because “a certain level of prejudice” might be present towards those who are seen as “different”. Another participant spoke about Islamophobia, and how it “runs deep” and is “a multifaceted issue”, in that there are various things which contribute to it, particularly highlighting there being ignorance about Islam. The participant went on to discuss how the spreading of Islamophobic narratives

can be subtle and occurs in various ways in society, including through media and education, also stating:

I know many universities are working on sensitivity training and cultural humility training, and it's appreciated. But for the purpose of this discussion, we're focusing on the gaps, because there are issues that still exist and there are issues that are still rampant. And I would say the majority of conversations actually tend to have some form of Islamophobic tendencies, on political levels, on social levels, almost every sphere of society, from the service providers, to the service educators, to the policymakers.

This participant draws attention to the ways Islamophobia is a widespread socio-political issue that is reflected in mainstream institutional practices and policies. This was echoed by another participant who found, in closely examining rehabilitation and reintegration of those charged with terrorism offences, that the religious identity of Muslims is “strip[ped] off...as if it is the religious identity that is the problem”. The participant went on to speak about the far-reaching impacts of the demonization of Islam and Muslims, stating:

So, I think particularly from that perspective when you look at those frameworks that basically demonize Islam and the Muslim community, it sort of trickles into other fields as well, it sort of trickles into other services as well. And it just makes it seem that Islam is this archaic, aged, backward religion and it holds people back from progress. Or that you know what, Muslim women are oppressed, and we need to come and save them from the people who are oppressing them. So, these sort of biases and prejudices, they linger around in people's minds, and then it manifests itself in the services that they provide.

Another participant mentioned how Islamophobic narratives in politics and at a governmental level can result in mistrust, mentioning examples such as Quebec's Bill 21, as well as the (now defunct) legislation that sought to ban the wearing of the niqab (face-covering worn by Muslim women) during Canadian citizenship ceremonies, going on to state:

When you have policies that have this type of lack of tolerance or blatant Islamophobic approaches in higher levels of government, then when you're translating that down into social services that are being established to serve the community, these narratives or these ideologies have implications.

The participant mentioned that “if services are seen as something that's offered by the government, people will be hesitant to access those services and those services won't be as open to serving minority groups”. Later, the participant also commented on how “every system has an impact on another system”, thus highlighting the interconnected and multifaceted nature of this issue. Illustrating how anti-Muslim sentiment may be reflected in practice, one participant stated:

So, a Muslim woman comes in for psychological support. And even though she hasn't expressed anything about domestic violence or abuse, you keep asking question after question to make sure that it's not there...So, coming back to the topic at hand, I think again addressing people's prejudices, stereotypes, and biases needs to be done, and then on top of that, increasing their religious literacy, and then on top of that, figuring out how we can support people's religious identities and not consider religious identities a threat.

Thus, participants have highlighted how anti-Muslim rhetoric and approaches in socio-political contexts can have implications for social services, including how services are developed, delivered, and accessed. Alongside demonstrating how anti-Muslim sentiment may manifest in social services, the above-quoted participant has also pointed to the importance of supporting the religious identity of Muslims, rather than considering it a problem.

The devaluing of religion, religiosity, and religious identity in society, and in mainstream social work education and practice in particular, was recurrently discussed among participants when considering the experiences of Muslims with mainstream social services and social work practice. For instance, one participant highlighted the necessity

of supporting the religious identity of Muslims, mentioning how religious identity is “often not put at the forefront” and how this is because “religion has become considered irrelevant within academia”. Echoing this, another participant, reflecting upon what may be contributing to the challenges Muslims experience in getting effective support from mainstream social services, mentioned:

“It’s the system. It’s the system. It’s the system. It’s the secular system. It’s the system and that’s how it was taught in the universities, in the colleges.”

Asked to describe what he meant by “the secular system” being part of the issue, the participant further explained:

What I mean by that is that in the secular system, religion is stripped away from everything. While for us as Canadian Muslims, religion is an integral part of our lives and who we are. So, if a service provider or a social worker does not have the knowledge or the background or understanding of my faith that makes me who I am, then that’s a big disconnect.

Another participant echoed these sentiments, stating:

For Muslims, Islam manifests itself in every aspect of one’s life. So, in a secular society that frames healing and frames therapy many, many, many times in a secular and from a secular lens, the importance of religiosity is sometimes sidelined.

Another participant spoke about how “the training in many of our departments of social work and others who eventually enter this industry has a particular orientation”, which may result in assumptions being made about certain worldviews. Furthermore, in reflecting upon where the challenges and barriers to receiving effective support may arise from, another participant suggested some answers may be sought through “reassessing how were the practices set in place”. She later also suggested:

So, it’s almost taking two steps back. Who’s designing these services, who’s offering them? If you go back to the drawing board, what kind of values and

perspectives are there...what are the objectives that are directing these services and policies?

The participant spoke about how if a program is designed and planned by a certain group, there may be a lack of understanding regarding the needs of another group. Additionally, she also spoke about how the ideas and objectives of those providing support and those seeking support may not align. The points of participants highlight how mainstream social services and social work practice may be informed by a particular perspective or worldview, that may not necessarily lead to effective support for everyone, especially when considering the Muslim community and the Islamic worldview which is central to the lives and well-being of Muslims.

Through these discussions, participants have underscored the pervasive nature of Islamophobia and the importance of considering its widespread implications, including for mainstream social work education and practice. Moreover, they have drawn attention to the tendency for Islamic identity to be devalued in mainstream social work education and practice, and in society more broadly, while also reflecting upon and interrogating the worldview and perspectives which inform mainstream social work. These dialogues illuminate key factors which may contribute to challenges experienced by Muslims in accessing and receiving effective support via mainstream social services and social work practice.

Theme 3: The Need for Islamically Informed Care

The community leaders and scholars who participated in this study stressed the importance of understanding the centrality of Islam to the lives and well-being of Muslims. Yet, participants also noted how the manifestation of anti-Muslim sentiment

and the devaluing of Islamic identity in mainstream social work education and practice have contributed to a practice context from which an understanding and appreciation of the integral role of Islam in Muslims' lives tends to be absent. This was further demonstrated through participants' discussions regarding challenges experienced by the Muslim community in accessing and receiving support from mainstream social services and social work practice. Various challenges were mentioned by participants, including stigma, a lack of information regarding available services and supports, and a lack of culturally aware and appropriate services; however, a lack of Islamically informed care was highlighted as a primary concern.

All five of the community leaders and scholars who participated in this study drew attention to the lack of Islamically sensitive, aware, and informed support in mainstream social service provision, simultaneously underscoring the importance of providing Islamically informed support to address this gap in care. In doing so, they also discussed the implications of this gap in mainstream social services, referring to significant challenges experienced by the Muslim community when interacting with these services. Drawing attention to a lack of appropriate support available for the Muslim community, one participant stated:

“There's not enough support. Particularly when you look at the Muslim community, Muslim community tailored support is not present. So, that sensitivity that is often needed to cater to the Muslim community, often we find very lacking.”

Another participant mentioned:

Muslims feel very, very, very disappointed with the current social services that are available publicly. Most of the people who come to us they say - I went to a counselor in the university, and it was a horrendous experience, their advice was

very misplaced, very insensitive, very out of touch with the community and the community's needs and my needs as an individual.

Another participant mentioned how he thinks many mainstream services “have a lot of work to do to understand the Muslim community and to understand where Muslims are coming from”, further stating:

Of course, we as Muslims, we always have work to do. These mainstream social service organizations, they have work to do as well. Although, the rhetoric is generally quite sound, questions of equity, diversity, inclusion, all these pretty sounding words, they rattle off the tongue quite easily when it comes to social service organizations, but practically, a lot of work has to be done...So, there are responses within the Muslim community to really help make Muslims feel as comfortable as possible dealing with some of these really difficult issues that mainstream organizations, although they have the infrastructure to deal with, they really may not have the cultural competence to truly serve in a way that's sensitive to Muslims and their identity.

Interestingly, this participant has pointed out that values which social services purportedly uphold are not necessarily always aligned with how the practice is conducted. Echoing this, another participant spoke about past observations of judgmental behaviour among social workers, also stating that “if you are a person who would judge people, you will not be a successful social worker”. Another participant mentioned how, particularly “from a mental health point of view”, there is “a lack of trust going to a non-Muslim health care professional”, referring to “fear of judgment” as a potential reason for this.

One of the community leaders and scholars who participated in this study also spoke about there being a lack of adequate social services for Muslim families and Muslim youth, as well as the need for a “shift” in how social services are offered. He went on to share, by way of example, how services in a school setting should be offered

in a way that ensures Muslim families and students do not feel hesitant about “freely expressing their religious practices and views and cultural practices as well”, stating that:

If that hesitancy is there, that in itself is a barrier and, as I have told many community partners, that is a failure. It's a failure. As a service provider, if you are not noticing that or not picking up on that, it means that we have to revisit the way we are offering services.

Moreover, when asked whether it is generally easy to find places to refer people to, this participant stated:

To be honest with you, sometimes I scratch my head, wondering where to refer, because in certain cases...I feel like I'm reaching a dead end. So, what I can say is that sometimes it's difficult to make a referral that is culturally or Islamically appropriate and something that the client would feel comfortable with.

In discussing referrals and whether there are ever situations where it becomes difficult to find an appropriate place to refer people to, another participant, alongside mentioning how decisions around referrals come with experience, described one situation, saying:

...There was a sister who needed psychological support. And then we tried connecting her with a psychologist very early on, but it clearly wasn't the right fit, because the psychologist could not understand what hijab was and why she wore it, and why it was so difficult for her to wear it. And because the hijab was causing her anxiety, the psychologist's solution was, why don't you just take it off...But those sorts of things, where people that come from a very secular, non-religious worldview will not understand religious traditions and religious practices, and why people actually do them.

This participant later referred to this example when discussing the supports that are available to the Muslim community through mainstream social services, mentioning:

So, I believe a lot of them do lack the sensitivity training for religious practices. And then also in terms of the infrastructure itself, the supports are lacking. So, in terms of the sensitivity in the education process, I think the example of the hijab that I gave you is an example of that, where people need to be informed about that. And then also in terms of food. Early on when we hadn't started up our food services, we would refer people to the food bank. And when they created their food packages, they didn't understand that Muslims can't have pork or alcohol or that

they require halal meat specifically, and not being able to source it. So, those sorts of things...And also in terms of the infrastructure itself, a Muslim family that is financially struggling, and perhaps the onus is on us as well, but when they go to a non-Muslim social worker, the non-Muslim social worker may just, without even contemplating – hey, why don't you take an interest based loan from the bank or open a line of credit or use your credit card to withdraw money - not knowing that Muslims can't do that. And then also, there not being another alternative for Muslims to take interest free loans. So those are two things that I think, education and literacy, and then also infrastructure, both of them need to be further developed and enhanced for the Muslim community.

Moreover, another participant also spoke to the need for appropriate and sensitive supports in social services, and how the lack of such support may be harmful for Muslims. Mentioning the example of Syrian refugees, the participant stated:

So, they are already coming from a place of trauma. And then there were several families who had to deal with an added trauma on top of their trauma, because of lack of the cultural and religious context in some of the social services, or the mainstream social services providers.

Overall, participants have highlighted the importance of providing services in ways that are Islamically sensitive, aware, and informed, and how not doing so may result in harm. The significance of such support was also demonstrated through various examples that participants referred to during the interviews, as they mentioned situations and areas in which dominant perspectives in mainstream social work, and in mainstream Western society more broadly, may not align with Islamic values, principles, and beliefs. Some of the topic areas referred to included food and dress, substance use, family dynamics, sexual morality, and financial matters.

In summation, the discussions with participants underlined a key gap in mainstream social work and social services as being a lack of religiously sensitive, aware, and informed support for the Muslim community, as well as some of the implications of

this gap, correspondingly underscoring the importance of Islamically informed care for Muslims.

Theme 4: Reimagining Social Work from an Islamic Worldview

Through the discussions with participants, the importance of providing Islamically informed care for the Muslim community was evident, highlighting the significance of reimagining social work from an Islamic worldview. Moreover, it was clear that this reimagining would require contributions from Islam and Muslims, an Islamically grounded and informed approach, and a recognition of the relationship between Islam and social service.

The Muslim Contribution

In reflecting upon how to reimagine social work from an Islamic worldview, participants spoke about the significance of contributions from Islam and Muslims for this reimagining to take place. One participant stated, “And of course, with more contribution from Muslim social work professionals, we’ll be able to make our contribution to the overall vision of social work” and mentioned the need for Muslims to ensure that “our religion informs our work [and] makes a valuable contribution to that work”. Another participant also spoke to the need for Muslim involvement, stating:

I would say that you need people who are situated in both worldviews, aware of both worldviews or multiple worldviews, to be able to articulate and translate the knowledge across the two or multiple worldviews and create a new framework or a more accessible framework that takes into account the needs of the Muslim.

This participant also later went on to discuss how, in order for the Muslim community to thrive, the community must be able to “articulate our commitments, articulate our goals”

and navigate through the various systems that exist and consider what works for the community. The participant further stated:

Those systems are not there structured in place to never be challenged. No, we should be challenging some of the basic assumptions, and we should be contributing to the conversation, and our voice is important. Our voice is important. It shouldn't always be like - how do we accommodate the Muslims - the conversation should be, how can Muslims contribute to the larger perspectives and to the greater framings in society.

Through this discussion, the participant underlined the importance of the Muslim voice and contribution to the reimagining process and to society overall. He also highlighted the need to critically analyze, and at times challenge and change, systems. During the interview, another participant spoke about not being afraid if there's "a need for the way that things are done, for certain things in the system, to change", because "everything that is man-made or man-written, it has flaws. When it comes to human beings, nothing is perfect". Another participant also spoke about the Muslim contribution and systemic change, speaking about how while the system has a responsibility to be more inclusive, Muslims also have a responsibility "to reach out and try to make the systems more inclusive".

Furthermore, the above-mentioned participant also emphasized the significance of Muslims contributing, alongside mentioning the example of research and its potential to impact policies and services; other participants also referred to research in the discussion on reimagining social work from an Islamic worldview. Additionally, this participant also spoke about how collaboration between mainstream social services and mosques and Muslim community centres may encourage discussions around how services "could be more in line with Islamic values" as well as enhance opportunities for the Muslim

community “not only to receive those services, but to contribute towards those services”.

Moreover, another participant spoke about the Muslim community and Muslim leadership contributing through advocacy efforts to request changes to social services. The participant stated:

As Muslim community and Muslim leadership, we should also make our voice heard through doing our part, which is asking various organizations, whether they're local or provincial or federal, to make the necessary changes in these social services that are provided so that they are approachable and suitable for the Muslim families.

Through these dialogues, participants have highlighted the significance of contributions from Islam and Muslims for a reimagining of social work from an Islamic worldview to occur. This was also exemplified and illustrated in discussions regarding their approaches to and perspectives on caring.

An Islamically Informed and Grounded Approach

Based on the discussions with the Muslim community leaders and scholars who participated in this study, it was clear that their approaches to providing support were Islamically informed and grounded. The participants referred to their approaches being informed by the Qur'an and the Sunnah.²¹ For instance, in discussing what informs his approach to providing support, one Muslim community leader and scholar mentioned:

I always try to find a basis or textual evidence, either in our religious text of the Qur'an or in the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad sallallahu 'alayhi wa sallam [peace and blessings of Allah be upon him] in the Sunnah. And based upon that, I think that's where everything is informed.

Another participant mentioned:

So, the source of knowledge for everything that we offer and we deal with primarily number one is the Holy Qur'an. And then the second thing is the actions and the

²¹ Refer to pp. 19-21 of this document for more information about the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

statements of the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, and that of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad sallallahu ‘alayhi wa sallam [peace and blessings of Allah be upon him].

Another participant stated:

“It’s more so than anything the deen [religion] informs our drive or our approach to providing support to the community.”

Moreover, participants highlighted the importance of practicing in a way that is Islamically informed and grounded and the necessity for understanding and respecting the sanctity of Islamic principles, morals, and ethics. Regarding mainstream social work practice, one participant mentioned:

...My take is that there's definitely a lot of good in it. And we as Muslim social service workers or social service providers, we can take all the good that's in there, but again, putting it into that religious context. Because majority of what is being taught out there in the mainstream social work's practice, we have it in our faith. But the challenge is in how to make that connection.

This participant also mentioned:

...What we need to do is uphold the values that we have, and make sure that these values are respected and met, whether we are service providers or we are clients. And that comes of course with training and with also bringing some sort of a change in the way that social service is practiced.

Another participant spoke to the importance of understanding and respecting Islamic principles, morals, values, and ethics, and “keeping their sanctity as well”. Furthermore, in discussing how to reimagine social work from an Islamic worldview, this participant spoke about how this involves an epistemological approach grounded in the “Qur’an and the Sunnah”, and “the traditions of our predecessors”, stating:

I think let's look at the epistemology, that where do we get our knowledge from. So, when we talk about reimagining social work from an Islamic worldview, that epistemology has to come from the Qur'an and the Sunnah, and from the traditions of our predecessors.

Overall, through the discussions with the community leaders and scholars, there was a clear emphasis on providing support in ways that are rooted in Islam and that involve a deep commitment to Islamic beliefs, values, and principles. Hence, a reimagining of social work from an Islamic worldview would require an epistemological shift, in which the knowledge base of social work is grounded in Islam.

Islam and Social Service

When speaking about how they became engaged in work that aims to support members of the Muslim community, a recurring theme that was highlighted among participants was the importance in Islam of helping and serving people. As one participant mentioned:

“I think part of my Islamic education was the huge emphasis on helping Muslims and helping the community. So that's how it just naturally came about, that it's implementing what I had learned and putting it to practice.”

Another participant explained:

“Islam is very much centred around serving Allah subhanahu wa ta'aalaa [glorious and exalted is He] through your service to people.”

Alongside this, the importance in Islam of utilizing one's knowledge and ability to serve people was also mentioned. One participant explained:

“As a religious scholar, your obligation, your teaching, is that you have to pass on whatever you've learned. So, it's a very service-oriented profession.”

Participants also highlighted that the guidance, strength, ability, and motivation to do such work is from Allah (God) and being able to help and serve the community was recognized as a blessing. Overall, through the discussions with the Muslim community

leaders and scholars, it was demonstrated that a central component of participants' motivation and inspiration to support people is Islam.

Furthermore, the Muslim community leaders and scholars who participated in this study shared examples that demonstrate the importance of things such as social work, social services, help, social caring, and social justice in Islam. While certainly not an all-encompassing discussion on the importance of these matters in Islam, some of the lessons and examples that were shared are mentioned below to illustrate the emphasis, inspiration, and direction found in Islam in terms of serving and caring for people.

Participants spoke about the significance of help, mercy, caring and compassion in Islam. For example, one participant referred to multiple sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), mentioning how they all speak about "being merciful, compassionate, and helping people through their hardships and challenges". Another participant spoke about being accessible and not harsh, as well of the importance of being empathetic, merciful, and loving. The participant shared:

We know that our Prophet, peace be upon him, was called rahmatan lil 'aalameen, he was a mercy to all of the worlds.²² And he was not punitive in his da'wah, his invitation, in his instruction, in his teaching. He was always one of mercy, of empathy, and he felt - he felt for those who he interacted with, and those who came to him with difficulty, with trauma, and with the burden of trials upon their shoulders. So, we have to make sure that we are empathetic, we are merciful, we are loving.

Participants also spoke about the significance in Islam of standing up for the oppressed, taking care of one's parents, neighbours, and seniors, upholding the rights of women and

²² See: The Qur'an - Surah al Anbiyaa', Verse 107 [21:107].

children, and treating animals in a kind manner.

In speaking about there being an emphasis in Islam on caring for those around you, another participant mentioned “our deen [religion] plays a huge role and places a lot of emphasis on caring for the community”. This participant also spoke about how Islam is “very comprehensive” regarding how to take care of the community, further going on to state:

And when we study Islamic history, the scope of social services also evolved. As the political or social evolved and expanded, social services also grew with that. So, our tradition is rich in terms of guidance of how to take care of the poor, of how to take care of those that are of our faith or that are not of our faith, and what are our obligations towards the community.

She went on to discuss some examples, such as the institution of child-care benefits by the companion of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), Umar ibn al Khattab (may Allah be pleased with him), during his caliphate. She also mentioned the healthcare system in the Muslim world, and how the care that would be provided was comprehensive and holistic, stating:

When we look at a lot of the Muslim world, healthcare was provided and it was a very comprehensive healthcare system, where not only did you take care of the physical need but also the spiritual and psychological need.

The significance of holistic approaches in Islam was also discussed and emphasized by other participants. For example, another participant mentioned that “Islam is a holistic approach to quality of life”. Another participant spoke about how something he would reimagine, in reimagining social work from an Islamic worldview, is “a holistic approach to everything”, mentioning:

I think that's something that's often neglected. That sometimes we get so specialized and so niche that we lose sight of holistic approach. Whereas, when you look at

Prophetic tradition, there is a very heavy emphasis on holistic approaches. So, taking care of mind, body, and soul simultaneously rather than isolating one from the other.

Furthermore, participants also spoke about the contributions of Islam and Muslims to benefitting humanity and healing and bringing positive changes to the world. One participant stated, “So, service, especially social service, is instrumental”, speaking about how companions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) left the Arabian Peninsula “because they saw Islam as something that empowered them, something that made them better, and they wanted to share it with the world, and they wanted to improve the quality of life of everybody around them”. Another participant mentioned:

Islam is rich with values that promote the protection of the right of everyone in society, regardless of their gender, regardless of their age, regardless of their ethnicity, and regardless of whether they come from this country or that country.

The participant went on to speak about how if people truly adhered to Islam and the commands of Allah, “the world would be a much better place to live in”. He also shared how at the time of the Muslim Caliph Umar ibn Abdul Azeez (may Allah have mercy on him), Muslims were “really adherent to giving their mandatory alms and charities” and that there was “widespread social equity”, so much so that, as the participant explained, there was a time when all of the zakaat (the obligatory alms/charity) was returned to the state treasury, as there was no one who needed it. The participant further explained how this was because “people were doing what they were supposed to do” and that “justice prevailed”. The participant also mentioned that the needs of those who were not Muslim “who were living under the Muslim rule then” were also “fulfilled and taken care of”.

Moreover, participants underlined the significance of intention in Islam and doing good with others to seek the pleasure of Allah. Some ways in which this can positively impact one's work and how it is done, including the mindset and selflessness with which it is done, was demonstrated by participants. For example, one participant shared:

In Islam, when you're in the service of another person, you're not looking at what is your compensation or what you're getting out of it. Because the reward is from Allah subhanahu wa ta'aalaa [glorified and exalted is He]... There's a Hadith²³ that the Prophet sallallahu 'alayhi wa sallam [peace and blessings of Allah be upon him] said that Allah subhanahu wa ta'aalaa is in the service or in the help of a person until they are in the help of another human being.²⁴ So, from that mindset when we're setting out a social program, policies and stuff, you're not thinking about - what is my benefit in this - you're just thinking about - how can I benefit those that are in need of this service?

Another participant mentioned a part of a verse from the Qur'an, in which God describes some of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), translated by the participant as: "they preferred other people over themselves, even though they themselves were in need".²⁵ The participant stated:

And I think that, that requires a lot of faith, that requires a deep understanding of what Islamic altruism looks like, that you are able to prefer your brother and sister in Islam over yourself, even though you yourself are in need.

The participant further went on to highlight how such behaviour is possible, as well as driven by and positively reinforced through one's Islamic beliefs.

In summary, the community leaders and scholars who participated in this study have highlighted the importance of contributions from Islam and Muslims in social work and beyond. Participants have shone a light on the importance of recognizing the value of

²³ Refer to pp. 20-21 of this document for more information about Hadith.

²⁴ See: Şaḥīḥ Muslim 2699 at <https://www.abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2012/01/15/allah-helps-brother/> (Daily Hadith Online, n.d.-e).

²⁵ See: The Qur'an - Surah al Hashr, Verse 9 [59:9].

Islamic ways of knowing, being, and doing, particularly, in this context, in terms of their emphasis on and contributions to social service and community care. In this acknowledgement are vital lessons for society more broadly, as well as for social work particularly, especially when considering the significance of Islamically informed care and the epistemological shift required to reimagine social work from an Islamic worldview.

Recommendations for Mainstream Social Work

In considering recommendations for how mainstream social work agencies and social work practices more broadly can most effectively support the Muslim community, the Muslim community leaders and scholars who participated in this study shared thoughtful recommendations. For example, one participant spoke about the need for enhanced literacy and sensitivity and supporting the religious identity of Muslims. In further elaborating upon how he would recommend social services and social work act upon these recommendations, the participant stated:

I think if we bring this down to understanding that there's a gap there, understanding that there's biases that are in any individual. So, it comes up with that recognition first.

And then number two, the humility to be willing to learn and understand that the way that we may know is not naturally superior to what other people practice.

And then number three, is reaching out to the experts in the field and those who do have experience for help and support. So, in this situation, if there are Muslim social workers who are already there, empowering them to educate the social services field. And then if they're not available, the imam, or if the imam's not available, someone else within the community who can help them navigate through these problems, rather than trying to figure things out for themselves. So, that's one part. And then the other part is, the existing Muslim clientele, constantly, regularly engaging with them - how can we do our services better, what's lacking in our practice - and getting that feedback will also go very, very far as well.

These recommendations mentioned by the participant highlight some of the recurring ideas in the recommendations of all five participants. Fascinatingly, this participant spoke about reaching out to experts, and it is apparent that it is people from the Muslim community who are being framed as experts, regardless of whether they are social workers or not; thus, the expertise is seen as being in the Muslim community. Echoing this, another participant emphasized the need for mainstream social service providers to listen to social workers “who have the Islamic knowledge and background”, also stating, “So, if the mainstream social service providers really care, they need to listen. They need to listen. And they need to basically act upon these recommendations that come from us”. Another participant spoke about the necessity for enhanced communication with the Muslim community, mentioning:

I think they need to reach out more to the Muslim community and they need to let the Muslim community know that they are present and they're there to serve. And they should do much more to engage with imams, Muslim scholars, and Muslim professionals, just to get to know the Muslim community. Because social workers, like everybody else, they're victims to a lot of the misinformation about Islam and Muslims. I think the lines of communication should be much more open between social workers and the community, to get to know the community, to know the community well.

This participant also emphasized “understanding what is at the root of this community, what is their belief, and also be sensitive and respect that belief”. In discussing how to address the barrier that may be present when mainstream social services and social work practices operate from a specific perspective which does not consider the worldview of Muslims, another participant mentioned:

That would take a bigger, bolder step. You'd have to go back to the policies and identify what are some stereotypes or biases that are, maybe not overt, but

underpinning some of these policies. And then identifying them and addressing them. And this would probably require reaching out to people from the Muslim community, reaching out to them and understanding them, understanding from them what their requirements are, or what is it that they need to feel more comfortable using these services.

In summary, participants underscored the importance of understanding and appreciating the centrality of Islam in the lives and well-being of Muslims, acknowledging and addressing anti-Muslim biases and stereotypes, valuing and supporting Islamic identity, being Islamically informed in social work education and practice, and recognizing the significance of contributions from Islam and Muslims to social work, and to society at large. Overall, the participants' recommendations mirror the key themes that emerged from this study. Further consideration of these findings and their implications is imperative and is reflected in the fourth and final chapter of this thesis.

***Al-Nu'man ibn Bashir reported:
The Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, said,***

***“The parable of those who respect the limits of Allah and those who violate them is that
of people who board a ship after casting lots, some of them residing in its upper deck
and others in its lower deck.***

***When those in the lower deck want water, they pass by the upper deck and say: If we
tear a hole in the bottom of the ship, we will not harm those above us.***

***If those in the upper deck let them do what they want, they will all be destroyed
together.***

If they restrain them, they will all be saved together.”²⁶

²⁶ [Reference: Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 2361] Retrieved from: <https://www.abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2013/04/29/hudud-limits-parable-ship/> (Daily Hadith Online, n.d.-f).

Chapter 4: Discussion

This study examined how Muslim community leaders and scholars in Canada understand the social support needs of the Muslim community, the kind of support they provide, barriers and facilitators for the Muslim community in accessing and/or receiving support from mainstream social services, and how mainstream social services and social work practices can most effectively support members of the Muslim community. The Muslim community leaders and scholars who participated in this study were found to engage with and support the Muslim community in Canada in numerous ways and through various roles. Participants highlighted the centrality of Islam in the lives and well-being of Muslims, and the importance of providing support to the Muslim community accordingly. However, pervasive anti-Muslim sentiment, as well as the devaluing of Islamic identity in social work academia, practice, and society more broadly, were identified as contributing to adverse experiences of Muslims in mainstream social services and social work practice. Through the discussions with participants, it was apparent that a key barrier to accessing and receiving effective support from mainstream social services and social work practice was the lack of Islamically informed, aware, and sensitive support. During the interviews, the Muslim community leaders and scholars who participated in this study also shared their thoughts on reimagining social work from an Islamic worldview, highlighting the need for Islamically informed and grounded support through the development of an Islamically informed framework for social work education and practice.

The Need for Islamically Informed Care

The findings from this study suggest that Islamophobia continues to exist in numerous facets of Canadian society, including social work education, practice, and services. Consequently, there is a pressing need for social work support that is epistemologically grounded in Islam, and that can provide Islamically informed care to Muslims. Literature demonstrates how mental health concerns experienced by Muslims as a result of the current Islamophobic context may instead be worsened by issues such as concerns around discrimination by service providers and a lack of religiously sensitive and culturally sensitive mental health supports, which may function as obstacles to Muslims seeking support (Ali & Awaad, 2018, as cited in Awaad et al., 2020). Hence, there continues to be a gap in services, for the Muslims seeking support who may not feel comfortable even approaching or accessing these services, let alone utilizing them, as well as for the Muslim community leaders and scholars seeking to best support the community, for whom making referrals to mainstream services was demonstrated as being a complex and at times challenging process, due to the potential harm which may result as a consequence of this gap.

Moreover, the necessity of increased religious sensitivity, training, and education was also highlighted by participants in terms of there being a need for greater awareness and understanding of the Muslim community, Islam, and the worldview which informs Muslims' lives. The supports that exist should recognize that not everyone lives according to dominant Western perspectives and that Islamic principles, morals, ethics, and values inform the lives of Muslims. If Muslims are not free to express themselves as

such, I would remind myself and the reader of the words of the participant who called this a failure. It is a responsibility on the part of both social work education and practice to reflect upon how to better support the Muslim community, who in the current mainstream social work context may not be getting effective support to address their needs and may instead be harmed through the very services seemingly meant to care for them.

Developing an Islamically Informed Framework for Social Work Education and Practice

The barriers to effective support for Muslims that emerged through the study findings demonstrate a clear need for Islamically informed and grounded care through the development of an Islamically informed framework for social work education and practice. The role of Islam in suitable service delivery for Muslims has been established in social work, as well as other helping professions (Al-Shahri, 2002; El-Amin and Nadir, 2014; Kennedy et al., 2010; Lawrence and Rozmus, 2001; Sauerheber et al., 2014, as cited in Abdullah, 2016, p. 387). Furthermore, literature mentions that “understanding Islamic values helps social worker interventions” (Al-Krenawi, 2016, as cited in Yusof et al., 2020, p. 16). Overall, centring Islamic ways of knowing, being, and doing was underscored in this research as an integral aspect of reimagining social work from an Islamic worldview.

This study has highlighted that reimagining social work from an Islamic worldview would require that the supports and services be informed by and grounded in Islam. Moreover, an important aspect of this is respecting the sanctity of Islamic principles, values, morals, and ethics. In considering the significance of doing so in

meaningful ways, one might consider Suleiman's (2020) discussion regarding

“conditional allyship and tokenization”:

And when groups tokenize the Muslim community by choosing our representatives for us that fit their tribal political schemes, right or left, instead of respecting the mainstream, their claims to fighting Islamophobia should be interrogated. Unity is not uniformity, though those that champion the former often demand the latter. (p. 20)

Overall, Muslims should be able to access and receive support, and to contribute to social work spaces, and society more broadly, in ways that respect and value the importance of Islamic ways of knowing, being, and doing, without feeling pressured to sacrifice our religion and who we are in order to conform to the status quo.

Finally, the findings demonstrated that the care that Muslim community leaders and scholars provide is already Islamically informed and inspired. It was clear that a central motivation for participants to engage in work that aims to support the Muslim community is Islam and its emphasis on helping and taking care of people and serving humanity. Moreover, through the discussions with participants, the importance Islam places on social service, social justice, and caring for the community was illustrated, as well as some of the ways in which this is actualized and Islam's significant contributions to serving and benefiting humanity. Additionally, it is necessary to recognize Islam's emphasis on and role in promoting and supporting societal well-being. Promoting and supporting well-being is also an important aspect of social work policy and practice (Hodge et al., 2016). Thus, this is a common ground between Islam and the social work

profession, and while ideas around what this might look like and how this might be done may vary, this is an important starting point from which to consider the implications of this research.

Implications and Recommendations

The Muslim community leaders and scholars who participated in this study shared thoughtful recommendations and suggestions for how mainstream social work agencies and social work practices more broadly can most effectively support the Muslim community, which have been integrated into the sections below.

For Social Work Practice and Practitioners

Through an Islamic worldview, things like need, help, and wellness are conceptualized in ways that at times are at odds with dominant, mainstream social work knowledge and practice, which tend to be Eurocentric, colonial, and neoliberal in their theory and application. Those working in social services sectors must, at the very least, acknowledge and attempt to understand the important role of faith in Muslims' lives, and the implications of this for the well-being of the Muslim community. This must involve being aware of and respecting the sanctity of Islamic beliefs, principles, values, morals, ethics, and practices. It is hoped this greater understanding highlights for workers, organizations, and the profession more broadly the importance of addressing Islamophobia in social work and social services, and in society overall, and providing support in Islamically informed and grounded ways. Additionally, with rising Islamophobia, which has also been demonstrated as seeping into social services and social work practice, the social work profession has a responsibility to acknowledge and

address anti-Muslim sentiment, and to critically examine itself. These services are purportedly meant to support and enhance the quality of life of everyone in Canada, yet services are at times delivered in ways that are biased and misinformed, hence repelling the Muslim community from even approaching, let alone utilizing and benefitting from these services.

This research challenges mainstream social services and social work practice to consider how the utilization of theories and practices rooted in a dominant Western worldview, particularly when working with people who do not subscribe to these ideologies and ways of knowing, being, and doing, may hinder the provision of support and, antithetically to the apparent aims of the profession, instead result in harm. Trying to change Muslims and impose dominant ways of knowing, being, and doing on the community has contributed to Muslims being silenced in and excluded from mainstream social work education and practice. The social work profession purports to care about social justice and anti-oppression, but what kind of justice is it when the ways and worldview of an entire community are excluded and ignored, or only accepted when they are aligned with the status quo? What is clear from this study is that instead of attempting to change Islam and Muslims, mainstream social work practice and social services must examine and change themselves to better support the Muslim community.

Furthermore, it is imperative that service providers have the humility to recognize and acknowledge their limitations when working with the Muslim community and the resolve to learn ways to support the Muslim community more effectively and increase the availability of appropriate resources. It is also essential to get feedback from members of

the Muslim community who have experiences interacting with these services. An integral component of developing an Islamically informed framework for social work education and practice is meaningful collaboration and communication with the Muslim community, particularly with those who have both sound Islamic knowledge as well as social service knowledge and experience, with these voices being centred in this process. It is hoped that this may help bridge the gap between Muslims and the lack of effective support available through mainstream social services and social work practice.

Finally, social work has a responsibility to engage in advocacy that challenges systems and policies that further the oppression of and injustice towards Muslims, not only within social work education and practice, but also in society at large. It is necessary to recognize the root causes and far-reaching impacts of Islamophobia and consider how to best respond, and to reflect upon how it may be addressed on a larger scale within various spheres of society, including social work, social services, media, politics, legislation, and so on. These are all systems which impact one another, as well as the experiences of Muslims with and within them.

For Social Work Education and Educators

This research has demonstrated the importance of enhanced education and training in the social work and social services sectors, as it is a significant gap that those who are being trained to engage in this work are not being exposed to at least a basic awareness and understanding of Islam and Muslims, especially when considering rising anti-Muslim sentiment in Canada. It is essential that those who are entering these fields learn about how to engage in practice in ways that are Islamically informed. This requires a

recognition on the part of departments of social work and other social service focused professions, as well as educators therein, that what is taught and how it is taught tends to be rooted in a particular worldview, resulting in the devaluing of Islamic ways of knowing, being, and doing and their exclusion from these spaces and practices.

Moreover, enhancing social work education and training to better support the Muslim community includes cultivating a sense of humility in students that the dominant Western worldview is not the only way of seeing the world and living one's life, and hence not the only way of engaging in social work practice. This should involve challenging status quo notions of expertise in social work, recognizing the expertise present in the Muslim community, and leveraging that expertise through inviting Muslims with authentic Islamic knowledge, as well as knowledge and experience in social services, such as Muslim community leaders and scholars, into academic spaces to discuss how to support the Muslim community most effectively in mainstream social services and social work practice. A further step may be having courses and programs which specialize in Islamically informed social work practice and that educate people regarding how to engage in social work in ways that are informed by and grounded in an Islamic worldview.

Overall, addressing this issue at the academic level is an important step for Muslims to receive more effective supports in the very services and practices that students may later engage in. This research should encourage social-service oriented programs, as well as academic institutions more broadly, to make space for Muslims to discuss Islam and Islamic perspectives on various subjects, even when those views do not

align with the status quo or with the views of other people in those settings. Making space for meaningful and respectful dialogue is necessary to challenge the oppression of Muslims in academia, as well as in social services and society more broadly.

For the Muslim Community

For those in the Muslim community who have had challenging experiences when seeking support from mainstream social services and social work practice, I hope this research may provide some validation of those experiences. It is also my hope that this research may be a means of reminding and encouraging the Muslim community, as it has been for me, to reflect on the beauty of our religion, and the important role of Islam and Muslims in contributing to societal well-being. To my community, I echo the participant who emphasized the importance of being persistent. We must be persistent in doing good and recognize the contributions our religion and our people have made to social services, and to society overall, alhamdulillah [all praise is for Allah]. We must recognize the value and the place of our religion in the world, including the world of social work and social services, and hope for and work towards change. As another participant mentioned, the onus is on Muslims “to be confident in their values and in their belief systems and to articulate that more openly and freely”. Instead of sacrificing our faith and our ways of knowing, being, and doing, although much of society might like for us to do so, we must be strong in our faith, conviction, and religious understanding and advocate for our worldview to be acknowledged and valued. We must be willing to challenge oppressive systems and structures, to contribute meaningfully, to recognize that our voice matters, and to not give up.

Suggestions for Future Research and Action

As the literature and this study have clearly demonstrated, there are significant barriers and gaps for Muslims in accessing and receiving effective support from mainstream social services and social work practice. This is strongly established in the research, and thus I believe future research and action in this area should focus on further exploring how to fill these gaps and address these barriers in ways that are Islamically informed and grounded and thus reflective of and responsive to the Muslim community's needs. The development of an Islamically informed framework for social work education and practice, and the research involved, should be led and informed by members of the Muslim community who have a firm grounding in sound Islamic knowledge, strong engagement with and experience supporting the Muslim community, and social service knowledge, skills, and experience. It is important to centre these voices, not only because these are voices that are so often silenced, but also because the expertise required to address these issues meaningfully and effectively exists within the community and should be leveraged in order to do so. Hence, further exploration of how to reimagine social work from an Islamic worldview should involve bringing together Muslim minds and amplifying Muslim voices, while focusing on producing meaningful change.

Concluding Remarks

There are significant challenges for Muslims in accessing and receiving effective support through mainstream social services and social work practice, particularly with heightened anti-Muslim sentiment in Canadian society. Paradoxically, instead of providing enhanced, more readily available supports for Muslims in this context, one of

the ways in which Islamophobia manifests in the lives of Muslims is through these very services and practices. This research has further illuminated the need for better, more effective support for the Muslim community in mainstream social services and social work practice in Canada. Providing enhanced support necessitates an understanding of the centrality of Islam in Muslims' lives and well-being. The profession of social work, in terms of education, research, and practice, must commit itself to providing support that is Islamically informed and grounded. An important aspect of this is the development of an Islamically informed framework for social work education and practice that is Muslim led and Islamically directed. Overall, the social work profession must reflect on how to better support Muslims and to how to do so in ways that respect, rather than seek to change, the ways of knowing, being, and doing of the Muslim community.

Finally, I remain hopeful that, in shaa Allah (God-willing), things can and will change...That someday, Muslims can get effective support from mainstream services in ways that respect our faith and worldview; That the social work profession can demonstrate that it is committed to the well-being of Muslims and socially just practice with the Muslim community; That Muslims can live in a world that recognizes the contributions of our religion and our people to healing humanity and changing the world.

I can imagine it – Can you?

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