

The Religiosity of Muslim Refugees in Germany: A Resource for Social Work Interventions¹

Claudia Roßkopf²

Abstract

For the majority of Muslims, faith plays a vital role in their lives. Specific forms of religiosity are significant as a resource, or coping mechanisms, in adverse life situations, which also applies to Muslim refugees fleeing to Germany. However, Germany, as well as German social work – which offers an important point of contact for refugees – are both very secular. This article explores the current role of religiosity of Muslim refugees for social work in Germany – and what role it could, and should, play. Qualitative interviews with nine social workers in Lower Franconia working in refugee settings were conducted. They showed that, for various reasons, the religiosity of Muslim refugees only plays a very minor role in the reality of social work. Still, occasionally it surfaces – especially in difficult life situations of the refugees. More frequently than theological issues, practical or organizational religious topics were addressed. Social workers who brought up spiritual matters on their own initiative were either persons whose own faith was vital to them, or they were aware of the importance of religion to Muslim clients. While the primarily supportive effect of religiosity and spirituality in adverse life situations is undisputed, social workers tend to only address it on their own initiative if faith is of concern for themselves or if they know about its supportive function for their Muslim clients. Thus, social workers should be sensitized, background knowledge provided, social work attitude shaped, and action competencies trained.

Key Words:

Muslim, refugees, religiosity, social work, Germany

1 Introduction

More than 2.1 million people have applied for asylum in Germany during the last ten years (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge [BAMF], 2022: 11). Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq were by far the main countries of origin for asylum seekers (BAMF, 2022: 17), meaning that a little over two-thirds of all refugees coming to Germany were Muslim (BAMF, 2022). Despite often being traumatized (Schreiber & Iskenius, 2013: 2), uprooted, separated from family members, and burdened by a new life situation in a foreign country with a foreign culture, language, and lifestyle (Sharif & Hassan, 2021: 4), faith remains essential

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² Claudia Roßkopf is a religious pedagogue working for the Diocese of Wuerzburg, Germany. She holds a Master of Arts in Social Work/Migration and Refugees from the German Jordanian University, Amman, Jordan.

and of great significance for many Muslims (Pirner, 2017: 166). Although existing research on the role of religion in the lives of refugees is not yet satisfactory, it is consistently found that the religiosity of recent immigrants is significantly higher than that of the native population, both among Muslims and Christians (Pirner, 2017: 154; Pfündel et al., 2021: 82f.). As, furthermore, numerous scholars have named faith and religiosity as important resilience factors and coping mechanisms (e.g., Rohde-Abuba & Konz, 2020: 17; Pargament, 2002; Koenig, 2012), the question arises whether the religiosity of refugees coming to Germany could, and should, be used as a resource, e.g., to process the trauma of war and flight or gain an easier foothold in the new environment.

However, social work in Germany – the profession which cares for refugees in many respects – is very secular. In social work science, preoccupation with religion has long been considered irrelevant, and in practice, it hardly plays a role beyond church institutions and often only marginally within them (Dhiman and Rettig, 2017a: 7; Nauerth et al., 2017: 12; Nauerth, 2017: 129). On the contrary, great importance is usually attached to the ‘neutrality’ of social work in matters of faith to underscore that the services offered are open to all persons, regardless of their religion. Even in social work curricula, religion-sensitive competencies, or the like, do not play a role, except at some church-run universities (Freise, 2016: 461).

Only in recent years – triggered, among other factors, by the immigration of Muslim migrants – more voices were audibly claiming that the faith of service users and social workers alike does not necessarily have to be ignored, nor should it be, depending on the situation (Freise, 2021; Nauerth et al., 2017; Hochuli Freund & Hug, 2017).

Presenting findings from a literature review and qualitative research, this article aims to answer the question of whether Muslim refugees' religiosity in Germany actually is, could and/or should be utilized as a resource for social work interventions to cope with refugee-specific challenges.

2 The Situation of Refugees in Germany

Refugees and displaced persons coming to Germany face many challenges. As long as their asylum application has not been decided upon, they live in constant uncertainty and fear of being sent back to their country of origin or the country they first entered within the European Union³ (Eichinger & Schäuble, 2018; Sharif & Hassan, 2021: 4). During that time, they generally live for up to six months in reception facilities (§§ 44-47 Asylum Act). They are assigned to the specific reception facilities according to their country of origin as well as reception quotas of Federal States and are typically obliged to reside there (§§ 47-49 Asylum Act). They are not allowed to choose their place of residence immediately after arriving in Germany, e.g., to join nearby relatives. As a rule, these reception facilities do not have self-contained apartments. As a result, strangers – most of the time from different countries, in different life situations, and from different milieus – often live together in close quarters or even in the same room, frequently leading to tension and violence, difficult hygienic conditions, permanent noise, and no privacy (Gravelmann, 2018: 379-380). Although the residents are provided with the means for the basic necessities of life, this is almost exclusively in the form of benefits in kind and a centralized food supply. As a result, residents can neither eat their usual meals nor properly pay

³ For the single steps in the asylum procedure and for a legal background see: BAMF (2019).

attention to food intolerances or other individual needs during meal preparation (Rehklau, 2018: 184).

While living in a reception facility, refugees are not allowed to work (§ 61 para. 1 Asylum Act) (Werdermann, 2018: 179). For many displaced, this means externally imposed inactivity, boredom, and idleness, which often leads to conflicts (Eichinger & Schäuble, 2018: 278). This also means that there is no possibility for them to earn money. Thus, refugees are still dependent on the German authorities for care and cannot send remittances to their family members who stayed behind in their home country (de Vries, 2018: 70).

For many refugees, the experiences in their home countries (e.g., violence, murder, or captivity), on the often-life-threatening flight, and arrival in Germany (pre-, per-, and post-migration) leads to psychological problems. For example, the rate of post-traumatic stress disorder is up to ten times higher for refugees and asylum seekers compared to the general population. Depression, anxiety disorders, and suicide attempts also occur more frequently (DGPPN, 2016: 1; Sharif & Hassan, 2021: 3f.; Zellmann, 2018: 6).

In addition, the foreign language, the new culture, the Christian or secular environment, the isolation in reception centers with hardly any contact with locals, and the frequent lack of educational opportunities for children mean additional stress for the refugees (Zellmann, 2018; Sharif & Hassan, 2021: 3f.; Zbidat et al., 2020). Whether religion, religiosity, or spirituality can be considered resources for coping shall be addressed next.

3 Religion – Religiosity – Spirituality

According to Lutz (2016), religion is the organization of a culturally distinct ‘religious community’ with an ordered structure based on collective practices, while religiosity encompasses the individual’s subjective experience and hopes placed in faith and the rule of religions. For him, spirituality means the spiritual experience and the search for meaning and transcendence, which can also be a search for God or the Gods of religion but does not necessarily have to be (Bowie, 2005, and Schmidt, 2008, as cited in Lutz, 2016: 11). That means a spiritual approach to life is often religious but does not need to be religious. However, within Christianity and Islam, spirituality is an essential part of religiosity, which is why it is always included in this work when talking about religiosity.

Religiosity is understood in a universal sense as a religious experience and behavior that establishes a “meaningful relationship to a reality perceived as higher, which is attributed to an essential relevance for one’s own life”⁴ (Huber et al., 2020: 5, translated by the author).

4 The Relationship between Religion and Social Work

Social work is rooted in the Christian-Jewish tradition, but to this day, the subject of religion is almost banned in German social work (outside of ecclesiastical contexts). However, as religion is an essential part of many personal lifeworlds, especially of many religious migrants, social work cannot avoid dealing with religion scientifically. Insights of religious

⁴ In the original German text: „sinnstiftenden Bezug zu einer als höher empfundenen Wirklichkeit, der eine wesentliche Relevanz für das eigene Leben zugesprochen wird.“

studies and theology are needed to develop a religiously sensitive social practice (Freise, 2006: 98; Bohmeyer, 2016: 153).

During the last years, interest in the topic of religion and spirituality in social work has gradually grown in Germany, but mainly still as a reaction to external demands, among others, in work with refugees and migrants and in connection with fundamentalism. Thus, the relationship between social work and religion is still seen somewhat as problematic and negative and only slowly as a connecting point for person-centered social work or as an essential part of social work itself (Straub, 2020: 353; El-Dick, 2018: 228; Dhiman & Rettig, 2017a: 7).

5 Meaning of Religiosity in Critical Life Events

Critical life events are severe, stressful challenges that fundamentally change one's life and are accompanied by intense emotions (Filipp & Aymanns, 2010: 16-17). Koenig, who reviewed hundreds of studies on the connection between a person's religion/spirituality and coping with adversities, unveiled a primarily supportive role of religion in illness, mourning, stress, ecological disasters, war, or terrorism (Koenig, 2012: 4).

Illness is the life stressor best studied concerning religiosity as a coping strategy. The reasons why religion and spirituality influence a sick person positively are diverse, even from a strictly scientific standpoint. A strong faith that reveals meaning and purpose even in difficult life situations, an optimistic view of the world that includes the existence of a loving, caring, personal, transcendental power (e.g., God or Allah), and a religious faith that provides satisfying answers to the existential questions of life and death – which reduces anxiety – help one to deal positively with stress. Thus, religion signifies a vital resource to protect against anxiety disorder, depression, substance abuse, or suicide. In addition, unlike other coping resources that rely on health, such as hobbies, work, or relationships, religion may be crucial for individuals with a physical disability. A second reason why religion and spirituality might positively impact a person's mental health is that adhering to the rules and regulations that most religions have preserves an individual from stressful situations and negative emotions. Such could be, for example, divorce, imprisonment for crimes, or abuse of drugs or alcohol, leading to harmful mental health outcomes. Finally, social activities, such as meeting others and helping and engaging others, are highlighted by most religions. This 'selfless' behavior safeguards against stress; it improves positive emotions and distracts from one's own hardships. Furthermore, the encouragement from religions to integrity, tolerance, gratitude, reliability, and other such ideals is essential for supporting social relationships and promoting positive feelings (Koenig, 2012: 7, Klein & Albani, 2007).

Thereby, people benefit more from certain types of faith than from others. For example, intrinsically motivated persons (people who 'live their religion') are healthier regarding mental issues and less prejudiced than extrinsically motivated persons (who make use of their religion for their own or social benefit) (Pargament, 2002). Even persons who identify with a religion, have higher self-esteem and lower depression or anxiety in contrast to persons who internalize religion through introjection (because of worries, guilt, or pressure) (Ryan et al., 1993).

Even faith, based on the confidence that life has a deeper meaning, a reliable relationship with God, and a 'spiritual connectedness' with others, results in better wellbeing (Pargament, 2002; Koenig, 2012: 7). Likewise, faith helps one discover the meaning

behind experiences, which Viktor Frankl, the founder of logotherapy, already recognized as a coping strategy (Frankl, 1999).

Furthermore, socially marginalized groups of people – as refugees in Germany can also be called – benefit more from their religion than others. In tense circumstances, people experience faith as particularly supportive, and such a disputed religious form as fundamentalism, though resulting in more bias towards certain groups, can also contribute to greater personal well-being. Whether religion has a positive effect on individuals also depends on how far it is integrated into their lives, i.e., in how far it provides suitable solutions to a particular problem, in how far the environment also supports this belief, and in how far it fits the person's belief, actions, and motivations (Pargament, 2002).

Abdel-Khalek reviewed several studies to examine whether the findings mentioned above also apply to Muslims. Indeed, he revealed positive relations between Muslim religiosity and well-being, life satisfaction, mental and physical health. More religious persons saw themselves as happier, felt more satisfied, enjoyed better mental and physical health, and religiosity showed to be a “coping mechanism against anxiety and depression” (Abdel-Khalek, 2014: 82).

5.1 The Concept of Religious Coping

Religious coping is the theory underlying the knowledge of the relationship between religiosity and dealing with life stressors. Lazarus and Folkman (1984: 141) describe

“coping as constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person.”

Based on this stress-coping model, Kenneth I. Pargament (1998) developed the ‘religious coping’ theory. It refers to using all personal and social resources that can be called upon through religiosity, which are available as coping potentials in a stressful situation (Pargament et al., 1998; Kusche, 2014: 13). In this respect, Pargament et al. (1998) recognized different processing patterns divided into positive and negative religious coping. Positive coping methods included a benevolent religious evaluation of adverse situations, seeking (spiritual) support from God, clergy, or parishioners, religious forgiveness, and serving others. They assumed a reliable God-relationship, spirituality, belief in the meaning in life, and spiritual connectedness with others as the basis. Negative coping mechanisms, on the other hand, comprise of resentment toward God, the clergy, and the faith community, a punishing or diabolic religious evaluation of a difficult situation and the questioning of God's power derived from a tense and unstable God-relationship, a worrying worldview, and missing meaning in life (Pargament et al., 1998; Pargament, 2002).

As can be assumed, the consequences of these different coping mechanisms vary. While positive coping goes hand in hand with less anxiety and depression, higher livability and – for example, after open-heart surgeries – a reduced threat of mortality, to name a few, this is in contrast to the effects of negative coping mechanisms, such as worse physical health or recuperation, more anxiety and depression, and a higher risk of death amongst older sick persons (Pargament 2002; Klein & Albani, 2007).

Both qualitative and quantitative research thus revealed religiosity/spirituality as a positive coping resource for most persons dealing with adversities (Koenig, 2012), even among refugees in Germany (Zbidat et al., 2020: 10; Pandya, 2018: 1401).

Concerning intercultural aspects, Fischer et al. (2010) reveal crucial findings comparing the religious coping strategies between Christians and Muslims. While Christians resort mainly to individualistic coping methods when confronted with life adversities (such as looking for personal spiritual support, self-reliance, and problem-solving), Muslims apply more interpersonal and collectivistic ones (seeking social support and information from family members and spiritual leaders). This pattern has been noted in all different kinds of life hardships, like physical and mental illness, bereavement/death, war and emigration, and other individual and collective life stressors.

5.2 The Concept of Resilience

Religiosity and spirituality have furthermore proven to be potential resilience factors. Resilience describes the positive adjustment to an adverse event or circumstance (Sprung et al., 2018), or “the ability of people to cope with crises or difficult life circumstances by drawing on personal and social resources” (Rohde-Abuba & Konz, 2020: 6, translated by the author).

Furthermore, O’Dougherty Wright et al. (2013) point to the vital role of culture as a resilience factor. In addition to religious rituals and ceremonies, such as special blessings or healing, specific cultural traditions and community support also have a resilience-promoting effect. This can also apply to members of ethnic or religious minorities supporting each other (e.g., in the case of flight). Even though these aspects, just like the different valuations of individualism, collectivism, and familism, have hardly played a role in resilience research so far, it is most likely that they are of great importance for the individual experiencing adversity (O’Dougherty Wright et. al., 2013). Sleijpen et al. (2018: 357), in their study of young refugees’ resilience strategies, found religion to be a substantial resilience factor because of its ‘support and guidance’, its deterrence from trouble, and as a ‘source of hope’. Simojoki (2016: 113) even describes faith as an ‘anchor of identity’ that can offer stability between the old and new life in a time of great existential uncertainty. It can also help many refugees interpret and process biographical breaks and traumatic experiences before and during their flight (Simojoki, 2016: 113, Rohde-Abuba & Konz, 2020: 45).

In addition to personal faith, the concrete help provided by the faith community also plays a respective role, offering practical support in everyday life, networking among each other, and emotional support in the event of experienced hostility and discrimination. Thus, religious communities are valuable resources that take on a protective function for the individual (Pirner, 2017; von Lersner, 2008; Rohde-Abuba & Konz, 2020: 6-7; Siebert 2020: 2).

6 Religiosity in the Lives of Refugees

Persons with a migration background living in Germany are significantly more religious than people without a migration background. The consistently higher religiosity of persons with a migration background shows that it is less the religious affiliation than the person’s origin that influences their faith (Pfündel et al., 2021).

Of the Muslim refugees in Germany, two-thirds call themselves very or somewhat religious, and even three-quarters of the refugees stated that religion is very important or essential for their happiness and well-being (Siegert, 2020: 7). Indeed, for only 49% of Germans, religion is vital for life, and for only 30% spirituality is important, with considerable differences between Western and Eastern Germany. Thus, the religion of Muslim refugees plays a far more significant role than that of the German population as a whole (Pickel, 2013: 18-19). In the words of Josef Freise (2017: 69), refugees bring with them, in and with their religion, familiarity to a foreign country in the sense of a 'portable homeland' that gives them security and a sense of home. Furthermore, 'religion helps define their identity' (Gozdziak & Shandy, 2002: 130), as, amid all the changes, religion is a constant that softens their sense of loss (Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010: 4).

The significance of religion for health and well-being for people in various life challenges, such as flight, has been extensively described and scientifically documented. However, regarding an in-depth insight into the relationship between Islam and health and well-being, there is a lack of literature, partly since there is still no reliable measurement instrument of Muslim religiosity that has been written based on Islamic teachings and tested among Muslims (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2011: 98-99).

Regardless, a few studies exist and reveal a "significant negative relationship between Islamic religiosity with depression and anxiety among the Muslim cancer patients" (Basri et al., 2015: 7), or – in a study about religious-sociocultural psychotherapy in patients with anxiety and depression – a significantly faster improvement of anxiety and depression symptoms if, in the case of persons with a strong religious or cultural background, consideration was given to it, i.e., if the therapist explicitly referred to it (Razali et al., 1998; see also Cruz et al., 2017).

Even in a study examining the influence of religiosity and spiritual coping on health-related quality of life in hemodialysis patients in Saudi Arabia, religiosity and spiritual coping were found to be the relevant aspects to the health-related quality of life of the patients surveyed. Religious practice and intrinsic religious beliefs had the most positive impact on their quality of life (Cruz et al., 2017).

A study about Somali refugee women in Australia revealed two important aspects regarding the importance of their Muslim faith. First, in their situation of 'homelessness' and being without the support of family members and social networks, Islam offers permanence, identity, and an 'anchoring home' that is created through 'practices, routines, and ideologies'. And second, in times of sadness, anxiety, or depression, their faith and especially prayer proposes solace and helps them make sense of their situations and lives. Thus, they experience resilience and continuity through their faith (McMichael, 2002: 179, 186f.).

Since for Muslims, religion is "a way of life (din) or path (tariqat) with God as the anchor that encompasses the total of a Muslim's work, faith, and being" (Mohd Mahudin et al., 2016: 112) obviously, it plays a significant role in and for their lives.

Thus, religion can also be an essential resource for refugee Muslims, which should be noted in social work.

7 Methodology

This study follows a qualitative research approach. Therefore, in summer 2021, semi-structured expert interviews with nine social workers and respective professionals, who all work with Muslim refugees in a social work context, were chosen to collect the data. The interviews were meant to provide information about the attitudes, experiences, interreligious competencies, and (structural) restrictions of the social workers in their work with Muslims.

Among the nine interview partners, two were men and seven were women, which corresponds with the gender ratio among social workers in Germany. Three interviewed persons were not social workers by qualification, but one was a special needs educator, one a pedagogue, and one a preschool teacher. Six persons worked for church employers (half belonging to the Catholic Church and half to the Protestant Church) and three for non-church employers.

The work settings of the social workers covered different kinds of counseling settings, a residential group for unaccompanied minor refugees, an initiative for traumatized refugees, and a shared accommodation for those in particular need of protection.

Among the interview partners were five Christians (three Protestant and two Catholic), one Muslim, one Alevi, and two persons of no religion. The age of the respondents covered a range from 29 to 57 years.

8 Findings

When 'social workers' are mentioned here, this refers to the persons interviewed in this study who work with refugees in a social work context. As described above, these persons do not all have a degree in social work.

8.1 Reasons Why Religion Does Not Play a (More Significant) Role in Social Work with Refugees

When asked what role the faith of the Muslim refugees plays in their work, the majority of respondents answered that their work is "not really shaped by religion". Even though it will become apparent later that the faith or religiosity of the refugees does at least make an appearance from time to time, the reasons offered for their general insignificance are highly diverse.

The most frequently cited reason why faith or religiosity does not play a role in the work with refugees was the assumption that such interventions by social workers are unnecessary. "They are so well organized among themselves; they don't need us to ask questions about their religious life." Furthermore, the 'resource religion' was simply used by the refugees and was experienced as helpful, even as a 'protective factor', for example, in connection with suicidality.

The time problem was one aspect that came up in all counseling centers, whether in asylum counseling within the community shelter, refugee and integration counseling, or migration counseling for adult immigrants. Time pressure, "we have to counsel non-stop", "no time to listen" or for a casual conversation was mentioned as an essential explanation as to why the client's religiosity did not matter.

Therefore, the social workers' tasks were more or less limited to counseling and supporting in official matters. How the clients were doing beyond that was of secondary importance. In the case of trauma, depression, or similar illnesses, clients might have been referred to psychosocial counseling, where faith and religion could have played a more significant role.

Another reason given for the fact that religiosity hardly plays a role in the conversation between social workers and Muslim clients was that they assumed that the point of contact might have been missing here, that the knowledge about Islam was not enough to address it, or because clients see it as a private space for themselves.

Other reasons why religiosity did not play a role in social work with refugees were reflected in statements of individual social workers, for example, the language barrier, the lack of an external framework, or the risk of being experienced as proselytizing. Also, the missing knowledge on how religious a person is, the religiously and politically neutral conception of the institution, and the wish to avoid tiresome discussions about different beliefs were further reasons why the "topic of religion is left out".

Not in a single case, however, was it a directive from the respective employer. Neither Christian nor ideologically neutral institutions had given instructions in this regard.

8.2 Occurrence of Religion in Social Work

The situations in which religiosity or spirituality was brought up as a topic between the persons interviewed and their clients were primarily critical, making the people feel down. In counseling, this was the case when the social worker had done everything possible in terms of content, i.e., bureaucracy, and yet the problem at hand could not be solved. Then, with a 'look above', one of them referred to God as the only instance one could now still turn to, or from which help could still be expected, which according to him the clients understood and gratefully accepted. The social worker described the grateful reaction of the Muslims to his small gesture as follows: 'Their hearts open' and 'you can almost physically feel' that the clients feel good about his reference to their faith in God.

In working with the young refugees, faith also played a role when their situation was challenging. The social worker encouraged the young people concerning the help of Allah ("Allah helps you. You are not alone."), which was also heard and accepted by them because "for these people, he is the most important." They said, "okay, he helps me, [...] I can do it."

In contact with traumatized refugees, Muslim clients also reported that their faith in hopeless life situations supported them in refraining from suicide, for example, because this was 'not an option' in their religion.

In the facility for the most vulnerable, one of the contact persons referred to the faith of the refugee Muslims by promising them support through prayer – again, under challenging circumstances. The clients accepted this offer particularly positively and gratefully.

Encouragement concerning the prayer of their parents, such as "your parents pray for you", was also used by the youth's social worker to comfort and motivate them. He also tied in certain religious traditions of the young people to let them feel comfortable and at home in the foreign environment, for example, by saying grace in Arabic at the table when he was alone with an individual Muslim client.

In the Initiative for Traumatized Refugees, the client's religion or spirituality was often asked about as a possible protective factor or resource in the initial interview. The special needs educator also appreciatively perceived this but did not further discuss it.

These findings show that in a social worker's contact with refugees outside of pure counseling settings (such as the residential group for unaccompanied minor refugees, community shelter for particularly vulnerable persons, and Initiative for Traumatized Refugees), where the contact between the two can be more intensive both in terms of time and personally, there were more opportunities to address religiosity. In this sense, one interview partner formulated: "So I, I bring it in where I feel it fits. And that is actually more in a one-to-one conversation." But "it is important to me that they are also doing well spiritually."

However, even in a counseling session after the essential things had been taken care of, the topic occasionally came up when there was still a short time left. Then it could certainly develop into a "really good conversation."

But in all conversations, it largely depended on the social worker whether religiosity was thematized. Because even if the topic was addressed, the social worker did not necessarily refer to it, as IP7 formulated, for example: "but I do not work with it that much."

The faith-related topics that played a role in the contact between social workers and refugee Muslims were, on the one hand, theological (also occasionally conversion to Christianity or the circumcision of boys), but more often practical (for example the different understanding of the roles of men and women in Islam, halal food or clothing restrictions) or merely organizational (like moving appointments because of Friday prayer).

8.3 Importance of Religion for Muslim Refugees

In examining whether the social worker or the client is more likely to bring up religious issues, the clients introduced a broader range of subjects without the social workers' intervention. These themes included essential faith topics, such as the young people praying in a seemingly hopeless situation, the clients accepting God's will even if they would wish for a different solution to the problem, or faith providing support in a challenging circumstance and preventing suicide. However, they also included topics such as the religious duties of prayer and Ramadan, including the social worker's invitation to break the fast and topics of particular importance in the new environment, such as halal food, circumcision, and conversion. Furthermore, some clients requested to learn more about Christianity and expressed their gratitude by wishing 'God bless you' to the social workers.

Most social workers attributed some importance of faith in their lives to the Muslims they worked with. In most cases, religion resulted in a positive function for their clients, namely as a source of strength, support, and meaning in difficult situations, orientation, support through prayer and mosque attendance, protection from suicide, and relevant community life.

The fact that religion could also have adverse effects, primarily on Muslim women, was mentioned by social workers concerning the religious community acting as a controlling authority. Thus, it was mostly about specific behaviors, such as wearing the hijab, or the appropriate conduct when dealing with a man, where the Muslim women were seen as either insecure or not acting freely, as they were expected to avoid the 'talk of men'.

A social worker described another negative effect of faith on some clients as “becoming extreme in their views.” For example, one client left Germany again to join the Islamic State (IS).

8.4 Importance of the Social Workers’ Faith for the Topic of Religion in their Work

The only characteristic common to the social workers who referred to the religiosity of their clients, except for the Muslim social worker, was the importance of religion and faith in their own lives.

Of the eight non-Muslim social workers interviewed, for six, religion “actually plays a minor role”, or “no longer plays a role” in their personal lives, which also applied to the topic of religion in their work.

For the two remaining interviewees, their faith now played a more significant role. One of them formulated: “Yes. I am actually a believer”, and also regretted that due to his current extreme work situation, he had no time to live up to his claims as a Christian and as a church social service person by dedicating time to the people and listening to those who were often very severely off “because many are traumatized.” Despite this exceptional time condition, he managed, through small gestures, to signal to his clients his responsiveness to this subject, which in turn was said to be received positively by them.

The other Christian said of herself that she “is an active part of a church community and tries to implement the values of the Bible and the Christian faith in [her] every day and personal life.” In her work, this was shown in individual conversations as she spoke on her own initiative about faith, prayed for the clients, and made clear that it is important to her “that they are also doing well spiritually”. From her experience, this fact was received positively and gratefully by the refugees.

The Muslim Social Worker argued that he believed in God but was not a “strong religious man.” Although he participated in and respected religious traditions, he felt that he was a modern person who made his own decisions. Despite this attitude, he often addressed his clients’ religiosity because he was well aware of the importance of faith for most Muslims due to his own Muslim background and used it in their favor.

9 Discussion

9.1 Role of Muslim Refugees’ Religiosity in German Social Work

In work settings, where contact with clients can be both more intensive in terms of time and more personal, religious topics were thematized more often than in pure counseling settings. However, one interview partner showed that despite a tight schedule and fundamentally different tasks in counseling refugees, it is still possible to connect to their faith because it does not take much time (‘look above’). When social workers, however, refer to their clients’ faith, it, in turn, leads to a positive relationship with them because it reveals interest in their beliefs, and they feel understood.

On the other side, even in the settings with more intensive contact with the clients, it largely depends on the social worker whether religiosity is addressed, which can be seen in the community shelter for particularly vulnerable persons, or in one social worker’s statement: “but I don’t work with it that much”, formulating her reaction to a client addressing his faith.

As a result, therefore, it can safely be concluded that the religiosity of Muslim refugees in social work in the region of Lower Franconia plays the role which the social worker grants it.

In this regard, it does not matter which organizations employ social workers. A causal relationship was not confirmed, even if one might have anticipated a positive correlation due to church employers committed to Christian values and being aware of the importance of faith.

However, since both the basic understanding of social work in German-language theory (Dhiman & Rettig, 2017a: 7) and, increasingly, German society itself, are secular (Pollack & Müller, 2013: 12), which accordingly also applies to social workers, the low significance of religiosity in the work of the social workers interviewed is not unexpected.

If it is now mainly up to the social workers whether the topic of religiosity is taken up or not, they are, therefore, the pivotal point for answering the question: Which role should and could the religiosity of Muslim refugees in Germany play in social work?

9.2 The Potential Role of Muslim Refugees' Religiosity in German Social Work

To many Muslims, their faith is of great importance. Their religiosity or spirituality means hope, confidence, and security, which is a source of strength, an essential resource, and a positive coping strategy in adverse life situations. In the case of flight, faith often has a stabilizing role and very often is, besides the family, the primary resource for emotional support (Scholte et al., 2004: 592; Lutz, 2016). In this sense, Lutz (2016: 42) calls religions the "treasury of modernity" that reveal the resources of meaning, salvation, and world relationship. However, for Schubert & Knecht (2015: 6), it is significant that clients go beyond only knowing their resources. Not until they are actively used can they be experienced as substantial and supportive, especially if they are emotionally significant, which can be assumed for religious and spiritual resources. Here, the social worker can be of help.

If now the individual reality or subjectivity of the persons is considered as an essential principle of action in social work, if the way of life and perspective of the addressees has to be the reference point of social work assistance, and if at the same time, the benefit of religiosity for the individual is demonstrated, social work cannot help but become religion-sensitive, and religious competence is necessary for the social work profession (Nauerth, 2017: 133; Lob-Hüdepohl, 2017: 162).

Therefore, religion in social work should not only play the subordinate role it has – due to the primarily secular social work professional socialization, and in some cases its marginal importance for the individual social worker – but awareness should be created among (future) social workers for its often great importance for the refugees. This is in line with Straub (2020: 354), who promotes the extension of social work to a "bio-psycho-social-spiritual perspective."

9.3 Requirements for a Greater Role of Religiosity in German Social Work

If the social workers' role is so pivotal, awareness should be created among them for the importance of spiritual or religious aspects for the majority of Muslim refugees. Support of the clients in their challenging situation has to embrace both bureaucratic matters and empathy for their condition.

Hochuli Freund and Hug (2017: 52) name the “thematization of questions of meaning” as a task of social-pedagogical support, so that

“existential feelings of being at the mercy of others and the search for a foothold do not have to be split off and acted out, for example by belonging to a political-radical, violent or religious-fundamentalist group”.

It has been shown that social workers who either care about their own faith or are aware of the supportive effect of faith for believers are more likely to integrate it into their work. However, since the personal faith of individual social workers can only be addressed voluntarily – for example, by church employers – the only starting point in the education and training is to create awareness of the importance of faith for many people.

This, in turn, should play a role – given the increasingly plural character of society – for all social work students (see also Dhiman & Rettig, 2017b: 225), but also, to a greater extent, in specifications for working in the field of migration and flight. Additional training opportunities and the promotion of the same by employers are equally crucial for the many social workers who already work with refugees.

9.4 Necessary Competencies

These requirements of a greater role of religiosity in social work comprise of acting competencies, knowledge, and attitudes. For Freise (2018: 375), ‘acting competencies’ embrace, among others, hospitality for religious groups of refugees and promotion of interreligious dialogue. This could include providing prayer opportunities or, where desired, supporting the celebration of religious holidays. One of the interviewees also mentioned the importance of joint interreligious activities and spiritual exchange, for example, by establishing contacts between church and mosque communities (Kolbe, 2021: 11). However, it can also serve as a template for interreligious activities, for instance, in the shared accommodation for those in particular need of protection.

What can also be assigned to action competencies is the ability to look at the spiritual “forms of consciousness and action” of the refugee clients and, if necessary, to support them in determining which of these are also helpful in the new environment and which may need to be changed (Mennemann & Röttgers, 2018: 427). It was also confirmed by some interview partners that there are questions in this regard among some clients.

An important aspect here is the fact that most refugees come from social systems where the individual’s decisions have to be balanced with the family or group. That means culturally sensitive ways that take into account the importance of families and communities for the coping procedures of Muslim refugees are crucial (Fischer et al., 2010). Furthermore, it has to be decided individually if individual- or group-related forms of intervention are best in the respective situation.

Already, the interview partners mentioned a whole range of attitudes that are crucial for social work with refugees, like openness to other people, sincerity, respect, curiosity, interest, and motivation to learn, authenticity, self-reflexivity, as well as the perception of the clients in their individuality, intercultural sensitivity, and appreciation.

Literature furthermore suggests that social workers need to be able to examine and provide information about their personal religious, spiritual, or ideological background (Freise 2018: 375). This includes once more the question of meaning and the handling of

this in work with clients. The goal should be sensitivity and attentiveness to these questions, recognizing the refugees' search or crisis in this regard as best as possible, dealing with it respectfully, offering support, or referring them to appropriate professionals.

Social workers furthermore should know and cultivate their own sources of strength and maybe learn meditation or a meditative attitude in order to prevent burnout and to become open to the other persons (Freise, 2021: 273).

The knowledge that social workers should have to give clients' religiosity the importance that is necessary and supportive begins with basic facts such as the five pillars of Islam, the six principles of faith, the significance of the Prophet Mohammad, and the holy scriptures of Islam, especially the Quran. An insight into different faiths within Islam and their specifics are to be included. Knowledge about religious duties and critical basic rules of Islam awaken understanding for particular behaviors of Muslims. Essential holidays and the significance of Islam in individual countries, cultures, and individuals' lives also provide valuable insights. Furthermore, it is beneficial to gain an understanding of which behaviors or characteristics can be attributed to religion or culture (Qantara, 2017; Cecil et al., 2018: 104) and what connection there is between Islam and some of the issues associated with it, such as terrorism. Finally, it should be mentioned that there is by no means 'the Islam', that there is instead a very different lived and pronounced understanding of Islam in numerous countries, cultures, and family associations (Krüger, 2019: 109). Therefore, the individual persons with their respective understanding of faith must always be the starting point in concrete social work.

In addition to this knowledge about Islam, social workers should also gain an insight into resilience research with particular attention to the religiosity of Muslim refugees and possible coping strategies, protective factors, and the like, which sensitizes them to dealing with the faith of Muslims in their work, especially in difficult life situations, and gives them concrete points of reference that lower the inhibition threshold to address it in their work.

All theoretical insights can serve as a basis for the concrete application, thus linking up again with acting competence. 'Intercultural counseling' is a keyword in this regard that encompasses knowledge of cultural differences and concrete possibilities for action to counter them, both in the counselor-client relationship and in questions that arise for the Muslim client in a non-Muslim culture.

Since some interviewees mentioned that they did not even know whether the respective clients were religious or not, a 'spiritual anamnesis' (Pandya, 2018: 1402), for example, the iCARING Brief Spiritual Assessment Protocol by Hodge (2018: 484) could be helpful. This semi-structured spiritual history tool is recommended to understand client's needs and resources better. However, experience has shown, for addressing spiritual needs, personnel has to be adequately trained, which unfortunately is usually not the case (Balboni et al., 2014). Therefore, university departments of social work and human service organizations should educate social workers to apply spiritual assessment and faith-integrated interventions ethically which is also a suggestion of Cecil et al. (2018) from their study with German social workers.

9.5 Further Possibilities of Social Workers to Support the Religiosity of Muslim Refugees

Since the tasks of social workers are not limited to the micro-level, it would also be conceivable – in the sense of the ecological model according to Bronfenbrenner (Salkind, 2006) – to work at the macro level to sensitize politicians to perceive the religion of refugees as a resource. As World Vision has formulated concerning children (Rohde-Abuba & Konz, 2020: 50), it is also necessary to support adults in the practice of their religion, for example, by further promoting the training of imams or by not putting obstacles in the way of enabling meetings of Muslim communities.

On the meso/community level, initiating multi-religious projects, for example, joint support for refugees, mutual visits, and getting to know places of worship, is another way to build bridges for and to Muslims. Thereby, multi-religious cooperation can become a positive experience for Muslims who had to flee due to violent conflicts with a religious background, where different religions connect and do not separate. Also, multi-religious cooperation might help migrants who are not used to religious freedom to get used to this 'unfamiliar idea' (Lyck-Bowen & Owen, 2019: 10-12).

Most refugee work in Germany is provided by faith-based organizations, where religion is usually not discussed to show that they are there for all people, regardless of their religious affiliation and at the same time not to be accused of proselytizing. However, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Wilkinson (2018) state, that it is more dangerous not to ask people about their religion because this can lead to avoidable mistakes. Moreover, it risks that this aspect, which is often vital for people, is 'ignored, overlooked and ghettoized' to conform to the 'mainstream'. Instead, governments and organizations should provide 'safe spaces' and opportunities for refugees to express their religious, spiritual, or cultural needs and, if necessary, their need for support in this area, which can then also be responded to. Especially in faith-based organizations, social workers should also be allowed – indeed, for these, it might be even crucial – to provide refugees with religious or spiritual services or refer them to communities doing so. Only in October 2021, the Christian churches issued a Joint Word titled "Making Migration Humane" ("Migration menschenwürdig gestalten"), in which they advocate pastoral care for people in need, regardless of religion and ideology (Deutsche Bischofskonferenz and Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland 2021). Clear guidelines can counteract proselytization (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Wilkinson, 2018, 10f.).

10 Limitations and Further Research

As far as can be seen, this study is the first to examine the role Muslim refugees' religiosity plays in social work in Germany. However, since the survey of social workers took place exclusively in four towns in the region of Lower Franconia and was limited to nine social workers, these findings cannot be generalized to social work in general. Further research could examine the occurrence of (inter-) culturality and -religiosity in social work curriculums and provide a helpful basis for curriculum designers in individual universities. The concretization of the various points of contact for religiosity in social work would also be an essential step to show social workers the possibilities for action in different work areas with refugees.

11 Conclusion

This research examined the role that the religiosity and spirituality of Muslims who have fled to Germany play and could or should play in the work of Lower Franconian social workers. These questions were answered based on a literature review and qualitative research.

The statements of nine social workers who work with refugees in various settings made it clear that religion plays only a minor role in social work for multiple reasons. Most often, faith or spirituality was addressed when the refugee was in a critical situation. Besides that, it mainly played a role in practical questions or also in imparting knowledge. Even if clients repeatedly brought up religious topics, they were not always taken up by the social workers, although most of the social workers attested to their clients a certain kind of faith or importance of their faith.

Because religiosity in social work with refugees plays the role which social workers grant it, it is either brought in by social workers for whom faith is also essential in their personal lives or by those who are convinced of the supportive effect of faith for others, even if this does not apply to themselves personally. However, the remarkable commitment for their work with refugees suggests that with greater awareness of the importance of religiosity for the refugees' lives and its supportive effect, a willingness to incorporate it into the work could be achieved.

These research results fit in well with the current state of research, according to which religiosity and spirituality have so far played only a subordinate role in social work, but a growing awareness was identified that they should be given a broader space and that there is also a need for this among refugees.

Through the study, new insights were gained into the reasons for the insignificance of religiosity in social work. These insights offer various starting points at different levels for giving religious and spiritual topics greater significance, for example, in the training and continuing education of social workers, in the staffing of individual institutions, or by encouraging employers not to exclude spiritual topics.

The current hesitancy to address religious topics with their clients can be explained by a dearth of sensitivity for the importance of the subject and a lack of background knowledge and possibilities of application. This could be achieved through appropriate preparation during studies or intensive further training.

The competencies that social workers would have to bring with them relate to all areas of social work, such as attitude, knowledge, and action competence.

Adequately trained social workers could provide critical support to religious Muslim refugees – especially in challenging situations. Since this is a recognizable goal for both institutions and social workers working with refugees, future as well as already active social workers should be sensitized and trained accordingly.

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