

ISLAM, CIVIL SOCIETY, AND PLURALISM: LITERATURE REVIEW

Afshan Paarlberg
Indiana University

The majority of the 1.8 billion Muslims that comprise almost a quarter of the world's population live in the Asia-Pacific region (DeSilver & Masci, 2017). Islam is the second largest religion in the world, increasing as the "fastest-growing major religion," and may become the largest religion by the end of the century (Pew, 2015; Lipka, 2017). Muslim Americans are "multi-racial, multi-lingual, and multi-cultural," although a common misconception is that most Muslims are Arabs (Hill et al., 2015, p. 5). Despite its large global presence and diversity, Islam is often at the center of heated debates over its compatibility with democracy and the West. These contentions often steer the conversation away from understanding the deeper dimensions of Muslim civil society.

The unifying belief of most Muslims is the belief in one God and acknowledgement of Prophet Muhammad as his final messenger, also known as the declaration of faith. It is important to note that some self-identifying Muslims do not know if they believe in God (Pew, 2014). Beyond this declaration, Muslims engage to varying degrees in voluntary practices motivated by one's heart and mind, an idea stemming from the Quranic verse "There is no compulsion in religion" (2:256). It may come as no surprise that Muslims are a diverse theological, cultural, racial, linguistic, political, and socioeconomic group.

The United States represents one of the most pluralistic Muslim communities in the world (Khan & Siddiqui, 2017). Between 2.6 and 7 million people in the United States identify as Muslim (Bagby, 2011; Siddiqui, 2010; el-Aswad, 2013). Studies indicate that the majority of Muslim-Americans make space for multiple religious interpretations (Sciupac, 2017). Muslim-Americans come from diverse cultural and

Copyright © 2021 Afshan Paarlberg
<http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jmp>
DOI: 10.2979/muslphilcivisoc.4.3.05

racial backgrounds, including over a third of whom are Black Americans (Mogahed et al., 2019). Muslims are split by gender, age, or race on whether and how to build coalitions with other groups, depending on the issue at hand (Mogahed & Ikramullah, 2020). And although 64% of Muslim-Americans primarily voted Democratic in the 2020 election, 35% of Muslim-Americans voted Republican (NPR, 2020). The takeaway here is that Muslims do not constitute a monolith.

As we examine the intersection of civil society and Islam, it is worth noting that religious institutions, the polity, and civil society are separate and sometimes overlapping spheres of religious expression. Much public-facing discussion has been directed toward examining the role of Islam within a binary “religious vs. secular” framework without differentiation between religion, state, and society. Major discussions have orbited around Islam’s compatibility with the West (Huntington, 1996; Kramer, 1999). These debates are often viewed from an orientalist lens in which Islam is a static and one-dimensional religion that has not evolved in practice and cannot be compatible with Western values. This simplistic narrative distorts the broader realities of how Muslims live and think. It feeds into Islamophobia, a long-standing system of discrimination against Muslims preserved in law and policy (Islam, 2018) and a sizable industry funded by at least \$205 million dollars between 2008 and 2013 (CAIR, 2015). This framework portrays Muslims as separate and “other” compared to Western societies, making them an unsympathetic out-group (Ross & Mahmoud, 2018), and ultimately incompatible with the West. Islamophobia is the framework by which Muslims are systematically marginalized (Islam, 2018) and ultimately racialized. Scholars that discuss the racialization of groups perceive it to be an adaptable concept that may look different based on the circumstances (Selod & Embrick, 2013; Lajevdari & Oskooi, 2018). Thus, social and political dynamics can expand the discussion beyond Black and White. For Muslim Americans who have faced discriminatory treatment by the government and public, they can be seen as distinctive from the dominant White race, which sets them up to be targets of hate crimes and discrimination. Ultimately, the racialization of Muslims can be seen as a byproduct of Islamophobia—a systematic dismissal of collective and individual contributions by Muslims within civil society.

Such orientalist perspectives have paved the way for anti-Islamic rhetoric, alleging that Muslims are incompatible with US values, regardless of Constitutional protections of religious freedom. A few recent examples include President Trump’s public smearing of US Muslim Congresswoman Ilhan Omar as a “horrible woman who hates our country” (Stracqualursi, 2020), Indiana State Senator Jacob’s

comments that “Muslims are traitors who should be deported” (Sikich, 2020), and a proposed religious test for Republican Shahid Shafi to serve as Vice Chair of the Republican Party of Tarrant County in Texas (Hassan, 2019). These highlight just a few examples of Islamophobia that demonstrate how Muslims are outwardly perceived as a monolithic, racialized minority.

Others have certainly argued to the contrary—that religious pluralism, consensus, and democratic decision-making are not only accepted in Islam but also practiced by even the earliest Muslims (Esposito & Voll, 1996; Said, 1999). Sociologist Craig Considine (2016) goes back to the time of Prophet Muhammad to argue how the Covenant between Muhammad and Christians demonstrated a commitment to religious pluralism. Among the four traditional Sunni schools of Islamic law, Hanafi jurists have well demonstrated the concept of faith-based pluralism in lands governed by a Muslim leader by applying Islamic law to Muslims and deferring jurisdiction for non-Muslim citizens to other courts (Warren, 2013).

Under this polarized framework, does civil society for Muslims mean something different than civil society in the West, as Samuel Huntington suggests, must religion and state be separated in a secularized way as a pretext for moving the conversation forward, and is there a need to reconcile the pluralistic voices and tensions that arise (Sajoo, 2002)? These questions help move the conversation deeper. As Arkoun (2002) states, “modern civic culture” falls somewhere between the two extremes of religious vs. secular. If we look beyond the confines of these labels, we will begin to understand a fuller story about civil society. Because “philanthropy is encouraged in Islam as an important part of living” (Siddiqui, 2013, p. 204), an examination of philanthropic practices is one way to gain a fuller, social history beyond the label of secular and religious.

While philanthropy is generally defined by Payton and Moody (2008) as “voluntary action for the public good,” it is important to understand that philanthropy adopts a specialized meaning in Islam. Concepts like sadaqa, zakat, awqaf, advocacy, smiling, abstaining from harmful action, informal giving, and secret giving can all be included within the definition of Muslim philanthropy. Zakat is a one of five pillars of the Islamic faith and is generally considered an alms-tax for one of eight specified categories (Curtis, 2001; Abraham, 2018; Mattson, 2010). Sadaqa can be any action or inaction for the public good (Siddiqui, 2010). Zakat and sadaqa overlap with each other and are referenced numerous times in the Quran (Al-Qardawi, 1999), although

the extent to how they overlap is debatable (Singer, 2018; Al-Qardawi, 1999; Mattson, 2010; Diouff, 1999).

During the time of Prophet Muhammad, a tax was imposed, and this practice continued under the first caliphate, Abu Bakr (Kuran, 2003). This practice has evolved over time. As a mandatory form of philanthropy, zakat remains a high priority for Muslim institutions, Muslim individuals, and Islamic banks (Rashid et al., 2017). Muslims today live under varied forms of governance—Islamic governances in Gulf states, secular governance among a Muslim majority population such as in Bangladesh, and diaspora populations in secular societies where zakat participation is individually or voluntarily centralized. Zakat and sadaqa practices are often influenced by power structures. For example, prior to enslavement, West Africans blessed children with weekly *saraka cakes*—sweetened rice balls gifted to children as a form of sadaqa. After forced migration to the Americas and under enslavement, this tradition of giving continued, however in a much-abbreviated capacity given the constraints on freedom and resources (Ghaneabassiri, 2017; Diouf, 1997). This reinforces the notion that charitable giving is important among Muslim civil society but has been practiced differently under varying conditions.

The waqf is not mentioned by name in the Quran or Hadith but remains grounded in Quranic teachings. Creative and critical thought helped breathe life into this charitable tool. The waqf was first associated with real and tangible personal property during the time of the Prophet, originating with a gift by Abu-Talhah and his wife of their beloved date-palm grove for the benefit of the community (Abdur-Rashid, 2019). Among varying cultures and customs, the practice of waqf adopted local characteristics; it became a source of funding for healthcare, education, arts and sciences, mosques, and libraries (Abdur-Rashid, 2019; Singer, 2018). At its peak, *awqaf* (plural for waqf) served as an antidote to extremes of both wealth and poverty. This definition later expanded to include cash-based property, albeit not without controversy. We see this trend continue today in places like Indonesia where the concept of waqf is being considered in its application to intellectual property. These examples of philanthropy over time and space showcase that at the very least, Islam in practice is adaptable and produces pluralistic ideas. By philanthropic measures, Islam is less one-dimensional than outwardly perceived (Ghaneabassiri, 2017; Kuran, 2003).

Comparisons between individual country studies also suggest a strong sense of pluralism in Islam. Turkey, for example, was carved out of the Ottoman Empire—a society with a once robust charitable society where philanthropy was present in nearly every aspect of life. Nearly

homogenous in religious affiliation (i.e., Muslim), Turkey has one of the lowest rates of individual giving today at about 12 to 13% (Carkoglu et al., 2017). Indonesia has a similar religious demographic, yet 98% of its Muslim population donates—the highest ranked level of global giving (Osili & Okten, 2015). Although nearly 90% of Egypt identifies as Muslim (Harrold, 2015), marked national political shifts have polarized, politicized, and destabilized institutions of charitable giving (Herrold, 2015). In the religiously pluralistic society of Lebanon, Muslim philanthropy is influenced by local politics, economics, and Western missionaries (Abouassi, 2016). In some post-Soviet societies, including Azerbaijan and Tajikistan, extended family, neighborhoods, and clans remain important for mobilizing community-based responses (Sajoo, 2002). Country comparisons further demonstrate differing adaptations of Islamic practices across societies. To better understand which factors have influenced these differences, a comparative approach may provide rich insights. For example, Lester Salamon et al. (2017) have introduced the social origins approach, which provides consistent patterns about power relationships between socioeconomic groups and institutions. This approach can be utilized to see if these patterns remain consistent when studying Muslim-majority countries and whether they account for the varied manners in which Islam is practiced and enters the public space.

Furthermore, the role and perspective of Muslim women deserves much greater scholarly attention. International interventions from Western countries in Muslim-majority countries have often developed gender-based programming from a feminist lens, assuming that the role of women in public spaces needs reform. During the invasion of Afghanistan, for example, gender empowerment programming ignored local culture, sidelined the existence of mutual aid, and promoted efforts that were incompatible with gaining local trust. The liberation of Afghani women became the rallying cry of the US military—a male-dominated, foreign power. Ultimately, however, “Afghan women express an understanding of well-being and liberation on very different terms than the international aid community” (Chisti, 2020, p. 594). The narrative of Muslim women continues to be portrayed in polar opposites—the liberated, Western secularist vs. the religious, oppressed woman behind the veil.

This depiction was also highly visible during accounts of the Iranian Revolution. In a groundbreaking assessment of Post-Revolutionary Iran, women in civil society are examined through various involvements in different magazines—including a look at what some might choose to say or omit as a means of making a political or cultural

statement (Mir-Hosseini, 2002). This unique lens uncovers a story of diverse female actions and ideas, beyond the protest pictures. In fact, gender in the public sphere takes on a more nuanced meaning, where we find that civil society indeed does not operate at the poles, but often somewhere in-between. In the United States, women of color have often been at the center of Islamic practice and social movements. Yet, their stories are often silent or shadowed by more prominent public male figures. One of many ways to trace the history of women of color is to examine how proselytization has evolved in relation to women. For example, proselytization by the Ahmadiyya movement in the early 1920s targeted women in its advertisements and programming because women were considered central to family life (Chan-Malik, 2018). In the 21st century, however, the absence of proselytization is indicative of respect for a woman's independence (Chan-Malik, 2018).

This brief overview serves to demonstrate that while literature about Islam and civil society is emerging, the data remains limited. This is perhaps because Muslims have been preoccupied with addressing issues related to Islamophobia. Nonetheless, there is little comprehensive data about donor motivations, institutional decision-making, and institutional practices. There is a glaring absence of monetary data and economic analyses. More extensive generalized studies are extrapolated to understand Muslim philanthropy, although there may be nuances that go undiscovered with this continued methodology. There is also a need to unpack hybrid identities—immigrant, Muslim, gender, age, financial status, and more. Deeper insights may emerge through such an exercise. Tracking informal giving presents another hurdle, especially given that many Muslims place high regard on anonymous giving. In addition, while the development of mosques in America is a growing trend, the most comprehensive longitudinal study on mosques in America self-admittedly excludes Nation of Islam, Moorish Science Temple, Isma'ili, and Ahmadiyya organizations. Members of these minority sects hold theological views that in some cases largely conflict with the larger, mainstream Sunni and Shia interpretations of Islam, which may offer one reason for their exclusion. Thus, while scholarship is emerging in the right direction to better understand Islam, civil society, and pluralism, there remains much opportunity to further develop this field of study.

Afshan Paarlberg is a scholar, lawyer and writer who works at the intersection of law, philanthropy and social justice, with a focused lens on marginalized communities. She is currently a graduate student at the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy.

References

- Abdur-Rashid, K. (2019). *Financing kindness as a society: The rise and fall of Islamic philanthropic institutions (waqfs)*. Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research.
- Abouassi, A. (2016). Giving in Lebanon: Traditions and reality in an unstable environment. In P. Wiepking & F. Handy (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of global philanthropy* (pp. 338–353). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Abraham, D. (2018). Zakat as practical theodicy: Precarity and the critique of gender in Muslim India. *Journal of Muslim Philanthropy & Civil Society*, 2(1), pp. 21–41.
- Al-Qardawi, Y. (1999). *Fiqh az-Zakat: A Comparative Study*. Dar al-Taqwa.
- Arkoun, M. (2002). Locating civil society in Islamic contexts. In A. Sajoo (Ed.), *Civil society in the Muslim world* (pp. 35–60). I. B. Tauris.
- Bagby, I. (2011). *The American mosque 2011*. CAIR.
- CAIR. (2015). *Confronting fear: Islamophobia and its impact in the U.S. 2013–2015*.
- Carkoglu, A., Erdem, S., & Campbell, D. A. (2017). Determinants of formal giving in Turkey. *Journal on Muslim Philanthropy & Civil Society*, 1(1), pp. 40–50.
- Chan-Malik, S. (2018). *Being Muslim: A cultural history of women of color in American Islam*. New York University Press.
- Chisti, M. (2020). The pull to the liberal public: Gender, Orientalism, and peace building in Afghanistan. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 45(3), 581–603.
- Considine, C. (2016). Religious pluralism and civic rights in a “Muslim nation”: An analysis of Prophet Muhammad’s covenants with Christians. *Religions*, 7(15), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel7020015>

Curtis, E. (Ed.). (2017). *The practice of Islam in America: An introduction*. New York University Press.

DeSilver, D. & Masci, D. (2017, January 31). *World's Muslim population more widespread than you might think*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/31/worlds-muslim-population-more-widespread-than-you-might-think/>

Diouf, S. (1999). "Sadaqa" among African Muslims enslaved in the Americas. *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 10(1), 22–32.

Esposito, J., & Voll, J. (1996). *Islam and democracy*. Oxford University Press.

GhaneaBassiri, K. (2017). U.S. Muslim philanthropy after 9/11. *Journal of Muslim Philanthropy & Civil Society*, 1(1), 4–22. <https://doi.org/10.18060/21415>.

Herrold, C. (2015). Giving in Egypt: Evolving charitable traditions in a changing political economy. In P. Wiepking & F. Handy (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of global philanthropy* (pp. 307–315). Palgrave Macmillan.

Hassan, A. (2019, January 10). Texas Republicans rally behind Muslim official as some try to oust him over religion. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/10/us/muslim-republican-shahid-shafi-texas.html>

Hill, M., Kowalski, D., Kocak, M., Muhammad, H., Ahmed, S., & Islam, N. (2015). *Study of intra-Muslim ethnic relations*. Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative.

Huntington, S. (1996). *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order*. Simon & Schuster.

Islam N. (2018). Soft Islamophobia. *Religions*, 9(9):280. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9090280>

Khan, S., & Siddiqui, S. (2017). *Islamic education in the United States and the evolution of Muslim nonprofit institutions*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

- Kuran, T. (2003). Islamic redistribution through zakat. In M. Bonner, M. Ener, & A. Singer (Eds.), *Poverty and charity in Middle Eastern contexts* (pp. 275–313). State University of New York Press.
- Lipka, M. (2017, August 9). *Muslims and Islam: Key findings in the U.S. and around the world*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/09/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/>
- Mahmood, F. (2019). American Muslim Philanthropy: A Data-Driven Comparative Profile. The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding. <https://www.ispu.org/american-muslim-philanthropy-a-data-driven-comparative-profile/>
- Mattson, I. (2010). *Zakat in America: The Evolving Role of Islamic Charity in Community Cohesion*. Center on Philanthropy.
- Mir-Hosseini, Z. (2002). Debating women: Gender and the public sphere in post-revolutionary Iran. In A. Sajoo (Ed.), *Civil society in the Muslim world* (pp. 95–122). I. B. Tauris.
- Mogahed, D., & Ikramullah, E. (2020, October 1). *American Muslim poll 2020*. ISPU. <https://www.ispu.org/american-muslim-poll-2020-amid-pandemic-and-protest/>
- NPR Staff. (2020, November 3). *Understanding the 2020 electorate: AP VoteCast survey*. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2020/11/03/929478378/understanding-the-2020-electorate-ap-votecast-survey>
- Osili, U., & Okten, C. (2015). Giving in Indonesia: A culture of philanthropy rooted in Islamic tradition. In P. Wiepking & F. Handy (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of global philanthropy* (pp. 388–403). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Payton, R., & Moody, M. (2008). *Understanding philanthropy*. Indiana University Press.
- Pew Research Center. (2014). *Muslims*. Religious Landscape Study. <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/muslim/>

- Pew Research Center. (2015, April 2). *The future of world religions: Population growth projections, 2010–2050*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>
- Ross, B., & Mahmoud, O. (2018). *Change for good: Using behavioral economics for a better world*. Management Centre.
- Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.
- Said, E. (1997). *Covering Islam*. Random House.
- Sajoo, A. (Ed.). (2002). *Civil society in the Muslim world*. I. B. Tauris.
- Sciupac, E. (2017). *U.S. Muslims are religiously observant, but open to multiple Interpretations of Islam*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/28/u-s-muslims-are-religiously-observant-but-open-to-multiple-interpretations-of-islam/>
- Siddiqui, S. (2010). Giving in the way of God: Muslim Philanthropy in the United States. In D. Smith (Ed.), *For the sake of God* (pp. 28–48). Indiana University Press.
- Siddiqui, S. (2013). *Myth vs. reality: Muslim American philanthropy since 9/11*. Indiana University Press.
- Sikich, C. (2020, October 29). Indiana Statehouse candidate accused of making anti-Catholic, anti-Muslim comments. *Indianapolis Star*. <https://www.indystar.com/story/news/politics/2020/10/29/indiana-statehouse-candidate-accused-anti-catholic-comments/6045375002/>
- Singer, A. (2008). *Charity in Islamic societies*. Cambridge University Press.
- Stracqualursi, V. (2020, September). Rep. Ilhan Omar on Trump's racist attack: "He spreads the disease of hate." *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/23/politics/ilhan-omar-trump-attacks-pennsylvania-rally/index.html>
- Warren, C. (2013). The Hanafi School. *Oxford Bibliographies*. Oxford University Press.