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*The Limitations of a Western Epistemology in Examining Muslim Community Volunteering*

**Practitioner Perspectives**

# The Limitations of a Western Epistemology in Examining Muslim Community Volunteering

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We don't exactly know the historic origins of volunteering and, depending on what definition we apply, it may go back to the beginning of mankind. What we do know is that most world religions, including Islam and Christianity, have for many centuries emphasized—in their scripts and practice—the importance of caring for and helping others, in particular those in need (Hustinx et al., 2015). Faith-based perspectives on volunteering have been the subject of scholarly inquiry in specialized academic niches, but they have received little attention in volunteering research more broadly, where volunteering has been examined mainly through a secular lens of citizenship and civic participation. This is not to say there is not also excellent scholarship on volunteering in religious contexts and on the role of faith and organizational religiosity in volunteering (Cnaan et al., 1993; Becker & Dhingra, 2001; Grönlund et al., 2021). Most of this work, however, has applied an analytical approach rooted in a secular, social-science epistemology and mostly looked at Christian faith groups.

I have undertaken research on and, I hope I can say, *with* Muslim communities in Australia and Europe for over a decade. I have tried to do so with academic rigor and empathy, but I have always remained an outsider to Islam, without deeper theological knowledge and without adhering to the Islamic faith myself. Bryan Turner (2023), one of the most eminent scholars in the field of sociology of religion, recently asked in the description of his book, *Understanding Islam*: "Can we understand a religion without believing and practicing it? Can we have knowledge about faith? … Can outsiders ever understand the world of insiders?"

I don't have an answer to these questions, but they are a good starting point for the key argument in this article: Western, secular epistemologies are not always ideally placed to examine and understand Muslim volunteering due to their common insistence on, often binary, concepts that struggle to fully capture nuances of faith-based volunteering in Muslim communities.[1] I will illustrate this by discussing selected empirical findings from my research and conclude with a call for greater epistemic openness as part of a larger decolonizing reorientation in our scholarship on Muslim communities and the social sciences and other disciplines more broadly.

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[1] These epistemic shortcomings do also apply to the analysis of volunteering in other communities of faith (especially non-Christian).

**The Secular Connotation of "Volunteering"**

Volunteering is a commonly used term in policy, civil society, and academia across the Global North. While there is no unanimous consensus on how to define it, most would agree that volunteerism refers to "unpaid activities that are performed out of free will for the benefit of others beyond kindship ties" (von Essen et al., 2015, p. 4); it often takes place in organizational settings but can also be performed (and some argue, increasingly so) in more informal and individualized ways. Although this general definition appears to apply to a broad range of community-focused activities within Muslim community life, many Muslims tend to not refer to their voluntary community engagement as volunteering. During my fieldwork I have spoken to many people of Islamic faith who would initially state they didn't volunteer but then described their community work in ways that perfectly match the definition of volunteering.

Some of them may associate volunteering with more structured and formalized activities, although contemporary definitions have emphasized its increasingly informal and episodic nature. The reluctance to regard one's community service as volunteering may also be related volunteering being a "Western construct" (Lukka & Ellis 2001) with an implicit secular connotation. This seems to be at odds with what many Muslims (and other faith groups) consider a religiously grounded practice and acts of lived religiosity (Peucker, 2016, 2020b). Keskin and Yucel (2020) demonstrate that the Qur'an and the *sunnah* contain a range of concepts closely aligned with volunteering, such as *fi sabilillah* (doing something for the sake of God) or *sadaqa* (monetary or non-monetary acts of charity). But none of these concepts are commonly used in sociological research on how Muslims perform these religiously grounded acts of what secular social science would describe as civic participation, volunteering, or active citizenship.

**Research Findings and the Shortcomings of Epistemic Rigidity**

My "outsider" research has applied such a sociological-secular lens to the exploration of "active citizenship," examining Muslims' civic engagement in non-Muslim majority societies. Over time, I have come to acknowledge the limitations of this epistemological perspective—limitations that can be mitigated through conscious efforts but not fully overcome. My studies have drawn on in-depth interviews with civically active Muslims, many of them engaged in volunteering. My most recent research (and the one I refer to the most in the following) focused specifically on Muslims' intra-community volunteering in Australia, and it combined qualitative interviews with an explorative survey of 138 Australian Muslims who all volunteered for a Muslim community organization. The sample covered a great variety of organizations in terms of their activity profile (e.g., Muslim student associations, youth groups, mosques, Islamic welfare and advocacy groups) and their religious orientation, ranging from self-declared progressive to more orthodox (e.g., Salafi, Muslim Brotherhood) and Islamist groups (e.g., Hizb ut-Tahrir).

Instead of presenting this study in detail (Peucker, 2020a, 2020b), I refer to selected findings to illustrate how certain commonly applied conceptual and

epistemic categories are often ill-suited to describe the intricacies of Muslims' voluntary community engagement. In particular, binary concepts central to Western epistemologies (reflected, for example, in the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss and others), such as secular/divine, altruistic/self-centered, intrinsic/extrinsic motivations, or religious/civic identity, often fail to capture the way Muslim participants in my research experienced their volunteering.

### *Volunteering Motives*

Confirming previous research (Peucker, 2018; Harris & Roose, 2014), for most study participants their Islamic faith was a key motive for their volunteering and community engagement. In the survey almost all respondents agreed (85% agreed strongly) that they volunteered "because it is an Islamic obligation to do good deeds." In the qualitative interviews this notion of a faith-based "voluntary duty" was articulated in many different and highly personal manners. While some considered their community work—or "service to humanity"—as "a big part of practicing my faith," others emphasized the spiritual reward they hope to get for their good deeds in the afterlife (Peucker, 2020b, p. 81). The central role of their faith, however, does not make their volunteering extrinsically driven, as their religious beliefs are by no means something "external." The words of a young Muslim man from Sydney illustrate this: "My religion teaches me to do this, and I have this passion to be compassionate. So, that is intrinsically in me, my second nature. And a natural consequence of that is, you know, the points that come with it. For me, they are both just synonymous" (Peucker, 2016, p. 221).

We would fail to understand the nature of these volunteering motivations if we insisted on applying binary labels like extrinsic/intrinsic or tried to describe them with different degrees of altruism or self-centeredness. Even for those who saw their volunteering as a way to "please God" and "collect points" for the afterlife, their good deeds were not a merely instrumentalist means to an end. The following view of a Muslim woman from Melbourne articulates these complexities, which are difficult to fully comprehend with a secular epistemology:

> For us (Muslims), religion is life, life is religion. It's the same. So, the reason why you innately feel better as a human being to do something for someone else is because that innate happiness … is inside your heart because of the Creator. The Creator puts that happiness in you that you're able to enjoy …. volunteering. (Peucker, 2020b, p. 81)

In the qualitative fieldwork, several interview partners put forward a perspective that stands in contrast to how volunteering is typically assessed as an activity measured against its outcomes. They maintained that for them personally their efforts and good intentions are more important than whether their volunteering would lead to any actual positive changes. A Sydney-based Muslim man, for example, said:

> I'm not driven by somehow thinking I'm going to bring about change … I

might not bring any change… Of course, I need to make that as an effort, but that's not my driving force. My driving force is to do the best I can so that I can be the best with God. (Peucker, 2020, p. 82)

A male interview partner from Melbourne similarly emphasized the importance of his good intentions in volunteering, referring to God's reward: "Ok, you get the reward according to your intention…. So, what do I do? … I go and help that person. Even if I don't help the person but I made the intention, I still get the reward." This faith-based prioritizing of intentions over actual change challenges how research usually analyzes volunteering through a teleological lens as an activity that is, by definition, aimed to "benefit others" and expected to have positive effects for those who volunteer, including strengthening one's skills, social capital or employability. Social science based research can, of course, identify and explore these nuances of Muslim volunteering, but it requires us to be epistemically flexible and open to new perspectives beyond well-established analytical measures and tools such as the Volunteering Functions Inventory (Clary et al., 1998).

### *Personal Implication of Volunteering*

The empirical insights into the personal implications of Muslims' intra-community volunteering further highlight the inadequacy of certain binary either/or categories within Western epistemology. For example, a vast majority of survey respondents maintained that, as a result of their volunteering within a Muslim community context, their "faith has grown stronger or deeper" (61% agreed strongly and 32% somewhat agreed), but at the same time 84% stated their "sense of being part of the Australian society has strengthened." This challenges the common implicit zero-sum assumption (at least in relation to minority religions) that in secular societies growing salience of someone's religious identity would somehow come at the expense of their civic identity and vice versa.

The study findings showed that through their intra-community volunteering Muslim participants made new friends; typically, their social networks expanded both *within* the Muslim community (94% agreed) and *beyond* their community (77%). To use the language of social capital scholars such as Putnam (2000), their volunteering resulted in an increase of both their "bridging" (intra-community) and "bonding" (cross-community) social capital. The binary concept of bridging/bonding may not in itself claim a rigid either/or classification, but it lends itself to being applied in such a way—which has been highlighted as "its weakness if researchers and policy makers assume the two are strictly mutually exclusive" (Patulny & Haase, 2007, p. 36). According to my research, Muslim intra-community volunteering strengthens social ties with fellow Muslims, but it has little to no socially isolating effect, contrary to what the notion of bonding social capital may suggest. Study participants stated their community volunteering has made them more "tolerant towards other people's views" (94%), "more engaged in civil and political life" (78%), and led to an increase in general trust in others (82%). Overall, intra-community volunteering has strengthened their political awareness and interest, civic skills, and engagement—in other words, it has fostered their citizenship, whilst deepening their faith.

**Call for Greater Epistemic Openness in (Volunteering) Research**

Equipped with our conceptual and epistemic tool kits, we try to shine light on the research subject—in our case, Muslim volunteering or community engagement—but in doing so, we also create shadows in our empirical inquiry. Sometimes, this means we miss important facets of the phenomena we seek to examine, and we need to adjust our epistemological angle in order to capture a more holistic and comprehensive image of what we try to understand.

Volunteering is a Western secular construct, but it refers to activities that are an inherent part of people's lives and communities across cultures and religions. If we want to gain insights not only into the convergences of these practices across different groups and communities but also into the complexities and specific nuances of Muslim volunteering, we must rethink how we examine these phenomena. This requires us to become more aware of our disciplinary biases such as our secular and often binary lens through which we try to make sense of realities, which hampers a deeper understanding of the phenomena at hand. This is a first step on a challenging journey toward greater epistemic openness and, more generally, toward decolonizing social sciences and humanities.

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