Hidden Voluntary Social Work: A Nationally Representative Survey of Muslim Congregations in Sweden

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Abstract

This study is based on a nationwide survey of local Muslim congregations (n = 105) and focuses on the patterns and function of voluntary social work carried out by the congregations. Muslim congregations in Sweden are not only religious meeting places, but also social meeting places and centres for the organisation of a broad range of social welfare services: outreach activities, support to newly arrived immigrants and activities for children and young people. The work is carried out on a voluntary basis at the intersection between the congregation and the community. Muslim voluntary social work appears to be most intensive in smaller municipalities with a large amount of unemployment. The dominant discourse on Islam in Europe has claimed that Muslim social work is part of an attempt to create self-sufficient enclaves that impede the integration of Muslim immigrants into the wider society. Claims of this type seem, however, to be largely unfounded. The Swedish Muslim congregations that carry out the most voluntary social work are those most interested in co-operation with other organisations and with authorities of different types and those that have the most positive experiences of the wider society.

Keywords: Muslim congregations, Voluntary social Work, Islam, Integration

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Introduction

Both Christianity and Islam emphasise the importance of having empathy and taking care for those in need. However, there are also differences in their attitudes. In the Muslim tradition, charity is not only something to strive for, but is a personal, lifelong and in many senses codified duty. According to Islam, everything that people earn is given by God, Allah and, in turn, Muslims have to be generous towards others, just as God is generous to them. Charity is thus a sacred duty and the compulsory giving of alms (zakat), calculated according to income and wealth, is one of the pillars of Islam. Fasting, another of the cornerstones of Islam, also emphasises the key role of charity: fasting during the month of Ramadan reminds believers about the poor, who are not able to choose when they are able to fill their stomachs (e.g. Kochuyt, 2009; Dean and Khan, 1997; Hodge, 2005).

In the Western world, however, religious charity has long been associated with Christianity, not with Islam. The Islamic tradition of charity has, in the West, been a hidden tradition (McChesney, 1995). It was not before the terror attacks on 11 September 2001 that any attention was paid to Muslim charity in the West, and then in a mainly selective and exclusively negative manner. Muslim charity work has been described indiscriminately as a ‘guise’ for extremism and terrorist actions and as a means of recruiting terrorists and financing terrorist networks (Atia, 2007). At the same time, however, researchers have begun to show a new interest in the Muslim tradition of charity. Historians have examined the charitable practices inspired by Islam in different eras (Singer, 2008) and social scientists have studied welfare policies in Muslim countries, including both the wide range of official policies (Jawad, 2009) and the social welfare policies and strategies employed by Islamic opposition movements (Davis and Robinson, 2006). However, the awakening scientific interest in the Islamic welfare tradition and for Muslim social work has not yet to any significant extent influenced the study of Muslim communities in Western Europe. Studies of European Islam often mention that Muslim congregations, as well as religious activities, also carry out social and cultural activities (Allievi, 2003). In addition to such general observations, there are also a few case studies of Muslim voluntary social work, mainly from the Netherlands (Bartel and de Jong, 2007), but as far as we know, no systematic, representative study has been made of Muslim charitable work in Western Europe.

Recently, social work researchers have paid increasing attention to the relationship between religious beliefs and social work (Graham and Shier, 2009) and there is a small but growing body of literature on Islam and social work in the USA and Western Europe (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2008). The focus of these studies is, however, on professional social work interventions in Muslim communities and the spiritual sensitivity
and awareness that this demands, but only to a very small extent on the
voluntary social work carried out by Muslim congregations. In short,
Muslim communities are often treated as the object of interventions,
rather than as capable social actors.

This article is based on an extensive survey of Swedish Muslim congrega-
tions, believed to be the first comprehensive national survey of the social
work carried out by local Muslim organisations in a European country.
Moreover, the study does not only aim to describe the orientation and
scope of this social work. It also aims to describe the organisation of the
work and to examine the social work carried out from the perspective of
integration. The latter aim demands a few words of explanation.

The majority of Muslims in today’s Western Europe are first, second or
third-generation immigrants and Muslim congregations are sometimes
described as enclaves that alienate immigrants from the surrounding
society and impede their integration. According to this isolationist dis-
course (Phillips, 2006), often voiced by the media and politicians, the volun-
tary social work carried out by the congregations is seen as contributing to
self-segregation. When mosques and other Muslim places of worship not
only meet the religious needs of their members, but also a range of social
needs, they are seen as inward-looking, self-reliant structures and are con-
sidered as a threat to integration. But is this a correct assessment? Does the
voluntary social work contribute to the creation of parallel lives or does it,
on the contrary, build bridges to the wider society?

Method

In this study, *Muslim congregations* refers to member-based organisations
with their own premises in which Friday prayer takes place regularly.
Finding these organisations is not a simple task. There is no comprehensive
list of Swedish Muslim congregations, and as is often the case with new
movements (the congregations studied have on average only existed for
sixteen years), they belong to a rather unstable organisational field: local
organisations are amalgamated or split up, new organisations arise and
old ones disappear. In order to localise as many congregations as possible,
data were taken both from the register of congregations kept by the
Swedish Commission for Government Support to Faith Communities
(SST) and from searches via the internet. Thus, congregations that are
members of Swedish Muslim federations, and therefore in the register of
the SST, were included as well as independent local organisations that
are not members of these umbrella organisations. After eliminating organ-
isations that no longer exist and ones that did not match up to the criteria
for a congregation as defined in the study, 147 active Swedish Muslim con-
gregations were identified. Of these, 105 answered the questionnaires sent
out. The response rate was, in other words, 71 per cent. In the missive letter,
the leadership or board of the congregation was requested to choose two people with good knowledge of the organisation to respond to the questionnaire. Full confidentiality was assured regarding both the congregation and the individual responders.

An analysis revealed no significant difference between respondents and non-respondents with respect to membership of Swedish Muslim umbrella federations (or whether they were independent of such organisations). Nor was there a significant difference in the response rate when related to the type of municipality in which the congregation was situated, as categorised by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions on the basis of the size and business structure of the municipality.

The congregations studied operate in fifty-seven municipalities of a total of 290 Swedish municipalities. Nine per cent operate in municipalities with less than 30,000 inhabitants and 19 per cent in municipalities with more than 200,000 inhabitants. In between these two extremes, 14 per cent of the congregations operate in municipalities with 30,000–50,000 inhabitants, 32 per cent in municipalities with 50,000–100,000 inhabitants and 19 per cent in municipalities with 100,000–200,000 inhabitants.

The questionnaires used were relatively comprehensive (sixteen pages with ninety questions) and were divided into different sections. All 105 congregations answered the first section of the questionnaire, containing questions about the demographic structure of the congregation, its premises, etc., and 104 congregations, namely all except for one, answered the questions about their activities, including those about voluntary social work, the focus of this article.

Voluntary social work in Muslim congregations

Voluntary social work refers to the voluntary welfare provided by non-governmental organisations. A common typology of voluntary social welfare organisations distinguishes between organisations concerned with self-help and organisations that perform social services for others (Lundström and Svedberg, 2003). It is, however, not so easy to apply these categories to the social work carried out by Swedish Muslim congregations. Muslim charity work includes both mutual support to members of the congregation and social work in the local community.

Outreach activities

Outreach activities are an important part of the social work that is directed towards both members of the congregation and Muslims and others in the local community. Almost half of the congregations (47 per cent) organise hospital visiting. In the larger congregations, special visiting groups are
responsible for organising this activity. Seventeen per cent of the congregations also organise activities directed towards older people living in nursing homes of various types.

More than a quarter (27 per cent) of the congregations also provides prison visiting activities. The Imam or special visiting groups visit prisoners who wish to discuss religious issues or just want social contact, and some of the larger congregations have special follow-up programmes for released prisoners. Others (10 per cent) have visiting activities directed towards substance abusers in residential care programmes.

Another important activity in many congregations is providing support to those who have recently immigrated to Sweden. Almost a quarter (24 per cent) of the congregations organise activities for recent immigrants. They offer a broad range of activities that can include everything from Swedish classes for women and elders to study groups and lectures on Swedish society.

Activities for children and young people

Relationship counselling and mediating in family disputes has an important role in the internal work of the Muslim congregation: almost 60 per cent of the congregations say that they take an active role in relationship counselling and mediation. Another prioritised area of the internal work of the congregation is work with children and young people. The key element of these activities is Qur’anic classes. This type of teaching is a tradition in mosques in countries with a majority of Muslims and is common in most (87 per cent) Muslim congregations in Sweden. The main focus of these classes is to teach about Islam’s Holy Book and to teach Islam’s common theological language, Arabic, but it also seems that the content of these courses is gradually expanding to include a discussion of how one can live as a Muslim in Sweden.

Apart from Qur’anic classes, about half (47 per cent) of the congregations also organise other activities for children and young people. These activities vary widely: from spontaneous outings or sports activities in the smaller congregations to continuous summer holiday activities, summer camps and scout corps in medium and large congregations. There are also some groups specifically for girls, mainly in large cities. In these groups, they not only discuss religious issues, but also organise parties, outings and study visits.

Social meeting places

Not many Swedish Muslim congregations can boast of a purpose-built mosque with domes and minarets. But the most significant differences
between mosques in countries with a majority of Muslims and Muslim prayer halls in Sweden are differences not in architecture, but in their function. In the Swedish Muslim prayer halls, religious and social aspects are often combined. The organisation of social activities for members of the congregation and for others in the community takes place here, as well as social and cultural activities for older people, children, young people and women. Although this integration of different activities is more or less unheard of in mosques in Muslim countries, this social work is not seen as a break with religious tradition but, on the contrary, as a manifestation of the Islamic tradition of charity. Moreover, these social and cultural activities find legitimacy not only in the theological tradition of Islam, but also in a more substantial way, through an analogy to the first mosque in history: the Prophet Mohammed’s home in Medina in which political, religious and social activities were intertwined and to other historical mosques that acted as centres for a whole cluster of activities that promoted welfare and education (Frishman and Khan, 1994).

Half of the congregations have premises adjacent to the prayer halls in which they organise social and cultural activities, and an increasing number of congregations have chosen a name that includes the word ‘Centre’, to emphasise the importance of these social and cultural activities.

The congregation and the local community

As mentioned earlier, there is a strong tradition of charity in both Christianity and Islam. There are also clear similarities between the social work carried out by the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Sweden, the dominant religious tradition in Sweden, and the social work carried out by the new Muslim congregations in Sweden. Many of the activities they organise are similar: from giving comfort to the sick to providing meaningful activities for children and young people. Another similarity is that the focus of their social work is on welfare services that are not provided by the rather comprehensive Swedish welfare system; in other words, they do not provide alternative or even parallel activities, but rather activities that complement the national welfare system. An exception to this is the childcare provided by some of the Muslim congregations (provided by 5 per cent of the congregations studied) and the few Muslim schools.

In spite of the obvious similarities between the social work carried out by the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Sweden and the social work carried out by the Muslim congregations, there are also significant differences. The social work carried out by the Church of Sweden is often performed by professionals—usually a salaried deaconess. Muslim congregations rarely have this type of personnel resource. Only 27 per cent of the congregations have a full-time employed Imam and the Imams are constantly torn
between their traditional religious role and the new social and cultural demands placed on them.

Not only is voluntary social work much more usual in the Muslim congregations than in the Church of Sweden, but the social background of the volunteers also differs greatly. Those who take an active role on a voluntary basis in the social activities organised by the Church of Sweden are usually well-educated, often live in the countryside and very few of them have a non-Swedish background (Jeppson Grassman, 2001). The opposite applies in the Muslim congregations. It is less common to find well-educated individuals carrying out voluntary social work in Muslim congregations, most of the volunteers live in cities and they have often come to Sweden as immigrants.

The most significant difference is, however, the degree of mutuality and closeness. Much of the social work carried out by the Swedish Church is performed by professionals and it seldom results in a close relationship developing between the provider and the receiver of help. In the Muslim congregations, the focus is more on mutual help and the distinction between givers and receivers is not always so clear. The social activities take place at the intersection between the congregation and the community—a fact confirmed by the location of the prayer halls: two-thirds of the prayer halls are located in housing estates and the congregation often lives close by; in half of the congregations, at least 40 per cent of the members live within walking distance and at least 60 per cent in a third of the congregations.

These close relations with the local community enable the Muslim congregations to provide welfare activities that are flexible and suit the needs of communities, plagued by problems of segregation and unemployment. The fact that these services are largely provided on a voluntary basis also helps to strengthen the ties to the local community, but volunteerism also creates its own limitations and problems. Volunteers complain of stress and burnout and there is always a risk of a lack of continuity, as the activities provided are totally dependent on voluntary effort.

Voluntary social work and integration

As mentioned earlier, the dominant West European discourse on Islam sometimes claims that the welfare provided by Muslim congregations contributes to a self-chosen isolation of their religious community. As the Muslim congregations fulfils a multitude of different functions—religious activities, social welfare and cultural activities, and so on—it creates, it is argued, self-sufficient enclaves that delay or even prevent the integration of Muslim immigrants into the community at large. But is this a correct description? Does this voluntary social work give rise to introverted,
isolated congregations or does it, on the contrary, build bridges to the surrounding society?

In order to examine the work of the congregations, we have separated activities of a clearly religious nature (such as prayers, Qur’anic classes, etc.) and activities related to family law (such as marriage, family counselling/mediation and divorce) from activities that are more specifically part of the congregation’s voluntary social work. The activities of the latter type, which are marked in Table 1 with an asterisk, have been incorporated into an index scale that indicates the breadth of the social welfare activities that are not directly related to religious practices or family law. The scale has an explained variance of 0.28 and satisfying internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha 0.69). All the questions have factor loadings above 0.30 on the index scale. The scale varies between 0 and 9 and has a median value of three activities.

First, a study was made on the association between the index of social work activities and a number of factors that describe the municipalities in which the congregation is situated. Two such factors were found. There is a negative correlation to the size of the municipality, namely the number of inhabitants ($R = -0.21; p = 0.04$) and a positive—although not statistically significant—to the percentage of unemployed in the municipality ($R = 0.16; p = 0.10$). The congregations provided, therefore, a wider range of social welfare activities in smaller municipalities with greater problems of unemployment, possibly simply because the need is greater in such communities.

Second, association between social work activities and characteristics of the congregation itself was studied, such as the type of premises, the demography of the congregation, namely its gender and age distribution, ethnicity, etc. No such relationship was found. A significant relationship existed, however, between the range of social activities provided and the two other types of activities carried out—namely the religious activities and the family law activities. The index of religious activities was based on the questions that are marked with a paragraph symbol (§) in the table, while the family law activities are based on those marked with a hash symbol (#). The religious activity scale is homogeneous but imprecise (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.33 (weak), explained variance 0.28, all the questions had a factor loading of 0.48 or higher). The scale for family law activities is both homogeneous and has acceptable consistency (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.64 (acceptable), explained variance 0.56, all the questions had a factor loading of 0.74 or higher).

The rank correlation coefficients (Spearman’s rho) are 0.29 ($p = 0.003$) for religious activities and 0.39 ($p = 0.000$) for family law activities. The social activities are not, however, related to the level of religious activity displayed by the members of the congregation (measured by the percentage of members that usually take part in Friday prayers ($R = 0.14$, not significant)). Neither does the nature of the premises (if, for example, they
Table 1 Congregation’s activities, mean values (with standard deviation) for quantitative variables, percentage for categorical variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Housing estate</th>
<th>Town/city centre</th>
<th>Other location</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>§ Are the premises open for daily prayers (salat)?</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of people who attend prayers on ordinary weekdays</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>41 (72)</td>
<td>27 (28)</td>
<td>46 (68)</td>
<td>39 (64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of people who usually attend Friday prayers</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>157 (330)</td>
<td>111 (100)</td>
<td>188 (205)</td>
<td>151 (272)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of people who usually attend <em>Id` al-Fitr</em> (= a Muslim holiday that marks the end of Ramadan)</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>533 (1,007)</td>
<td>357 (367)</td>
<td>703 (970)</td>
<td>523 (891)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Does the mosque have authorisation to register marriages?</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of marriages per annum</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>11 (9)</td>
<td>21 (21)</td>
<td>12 (3)</td>
<td>13 (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ Are Qur’an courses given for children and young people?</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of participants in Qur’an courses</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>92 (150)</td>
<td>84 (110)</td>
<td>80 (50)</td>
<td>88 (128)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Does the mosque provide childcare?</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children in childcare</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>68 (53)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>68 (53)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Other activities for children or adolescents?</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth club, number of boys</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>32 (18)</td>
<td>35 (30)</td>
<td>36 (31)</td>
<td>33 (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth club, number of girls</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>26 (24)</td>
<td>41 (53)</td>
<td>34 (31)</td>
<td>29 (31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ Does the congregation have a salaried Imam?</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other employed staff?</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Organised activities targeting new immigrants to Sweden</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Organised activities targeting the elderly in nursing homes</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Organised activities targeting patients in hospital</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Organised activities targeting prisoners</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Organised activities targeting people in residential programmes for substance misusers</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Family counselling and mediation in family conflicts</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many receive family counselling per annum</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>24 (46)</td>
<td>30 (46)</td>
<td>21 (27)</td>
<td>24 (42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Register divorce</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If yes, how many divorces per annum?</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16 (14)</td>
<td>7 (8)</td>
<td>23 (47)</td>
<td>13 (27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Provide temporary accommodation to the homeless</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide international aid</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ Organise collections for specific causes for <em>Zakat al-Fitr</em> (= charity given to poor at the end of Ramadan)</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Provide support to those making pilgrimages to Mecca</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Other social work provided by the congregation at present</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Other planned social work in the future</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Included in the scale ‘Social welfare activities’; § included in the scale ‘Religious activities’; # included in ‘Family law activities’.
have a simple room for prayer meetings or a mosque) and to what extent the premises are visible to the surrounding community bear any relation to the range of social work carried out. Two scales were used for the type of premises used. First, the ‘degree of mosque’ measured to what extent the premises have the attributes associated with a mosque rather than simply a prayer hall (based on six questions about Muslim architecture, reconstruction to facilitate religious practices, including a pulpit, the geographical orientation of prayer hall, facilities for ablutions, etc.). Second, ‘visibility’ measured the degree to which the premises resemble a mosque or are presented as a Muslim prayer hall from the outside, such as through its architecture or signs. Both scales are shown in factor analysis to be homogeneous, which gives support to their construct validity (‘Degree of mosque’: all six questions have factor loadings higher than 0.52; the explained variance is 0.41 and Cronbach’s alpha is 0.68. ‘Visibility’: all five questions have a factor loading of 0.40 or higher; the explained variance is 0.44 and Cronbach’s alpha is 0.52).

Finally, an analysis was made of whether there is any relationship between the congregation’s positive or negative experiences and attitudes to the majority society. In the same way as described above, we have created scales of the extent to which the congregation has experienced opposition or support from the surrounding society and to what extent the congregation has entered into co-operation with other organisations and with different authorities. A scale on Support from the neighbouring society was created based on seven five-grade Likert-type questions on the degree to which support had been given from various institutions or organisations (the municipality, political parties, other religious congregations, media, enterprises, etc.). Another scale on Opposition from the same type of organisations was based on seven similar questions. The Support scale had an acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.56) while the Opposition scale had satisfactory consistency (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.75). Additionally, a scale was created on Openness and Cooperation with the Wider Society, based on sixteen yes/no questions (co-operation with other organisations and authorities, organised activities in which non-Muslims were invited, visits to schools, etc.). This scale was normally distributed and had satisfactory internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.76).

By using these and other available variables, it is possible to test the validity of the claim that the social work carried out by the Muslim congregations functions as an impediment to integration or that this social welfare increases segregation by isolating the community from the society at large. If this claim is correct, the extent of the social work carried out should be negatively correlated to the degree of openness and co-operation and positively correlated to experiences of opposition from the majority society. The results of this study show the exact opposite. The extent of voluntary social work is strongly correlated with the degree of openness.
and co-operation ($R = 0.54; p = 0.000$) and shows no correlation at all with an experience of opposition ($R = 0.03; p = 0.76$). On the contrary, there is positive correlation to a feeling of support from the majority society ($R = 0.29; p = 0.003$). It is in fact the case that the congregations that provide most social welfare activities are those that are most interested in co-operation with the majority society and that have the most positive experience of society at large.

Conclusions

A few case studies of Muslim congregations in West Europe have mentioned the role of voluntary social work. However, this would appear to be the first study to present data collected throughout an entire European country, which enables more general conclusions to be drawn. Muslim congregations in Sweden are not only religious meeting places, but also social meeting places and centres for the organisation of a broad range and significant amount of social welfare services. Outreach activities, support to newly arrived immigrants and activities for children and young people are the type of activities that have their roots in the long Islamic tradition of charity, which has previously been more or less ignored in the West. This work is carried out on a voluntary basis at the intersection between the congregation and the community, namely it is directed towards both members of the congregation and to Muslims and others in the local community. Voluntary social work appears to be most intensive in smaller municipalities with a large amount of unemployment.

Perhaps the most interesting result of the study is the relationship between the social welfare provided by the congregation and the degree of openness of the congregation and its willingness to co-operate with the wider society. The dominant discourse on Islam in Europe has claimed that the social work carried out by mosques is part of an attempt to create a type of parallel society, or self-sufficient enclaves that impede the integration of Muslim immigrants into the wider society. Claims of this type seem, however, to be largely unfounded. The Swedish Muslim congregations that carry out the most voluntary social work are those with the most open attitudes, those most interested in co-operation with other organisations and with authorities of different types and those that have the most positive experiences of the wider society.

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