Islam and Social Work: Debating Values, Transforming Practice

Sara A. Crabtree, Fatima Husain, and Basia Spalek
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In the introduction and the first section, the authors provide an overview of their book and approach. According to them, every social worker needs to be familiar with the aforementioned concepts when dealing with Muslim clients. Throughout the book, the authors define the pillars and values of Islam and shed light on the real meaning of some of the words that became

highly mediatized after 9/11, such as jihad, *niqab*, honor, women's rights, marital violence, and homosexuality.

In the introduction, the first section, the authors overview their book and approach. The remaining sections address, respectively, the key concepts found in the Muslim world, social work education in Islam, gender relations and the family's centrality, common issues that social workers come across when working with Muslim families, health issues, and, lastly, crime, victimization, and criminal justice in Muslim communities. The conclusion contains suggestions as to which areas would benefit from future research.

Overall, the authors have succeeded in presenting a simplified overview of some basic Islamic concepts. Social workers who are unfamiliar with Islam should not, however, assume that they will be able to understand Muslims simply by reading this book, for the concepts discussed are far more complex than this book indicates. Furthermore, many of the interpretations provided have undergone various degrees of cultural influence. Rather than refer to the religious authorities of the Sunnis, Shi`ahs, and Sufis, and instead of drawing from the Qur'an, the hadith, and the Shari`ah, the authors appear to have relied upon interpretations made by people who have no expertise in Islam. Although it would have been beneficial for them to go deeper into the meaning of some concepts, this may have been impossible and perhaps ill-advised, since the field of Islamic studies seems to be well outside their area of specialization.

For reasons that are difficult to explain, the authors opted to use English words to convey technical Arabic terms. In so doing, however, they ended up translating terms in such a way that does not reflect their original meaning. For example, they refer to the *veil* (pp. 28-29, 81, 82-85), a description that is misleading. Islamic modest dress mandates that Muslim women cover their hair and bodies, with the exception of their faces and hands. By referring to the veil, the authors may give the impression that the only thing a Muslim woman has to cover is her hair. At the very least, they should simply have spoken of hijab, since *veil* can apply to both the head-scarf (*khimar*) and the face-veil (*niqab*), and attempted to distinguish between strictly Islamic practices and pre-Islamic cultural customs.

It was both surprising and shocking that the authors spoke of "vengence" as opposed to *qisas* (pp. 91-92). The pre-Islamic Arabs had a long history of tribal warfare. The Prophet Muhammad opposed this custom and instituted *qisas* to regulate disputes. In pre-Islamic times, it was an eye for an eye and revenge was blind. According to Islam, however, only the murderer can be put to death. Furthermore, Islam distinguishes between first- and second-degree murder and accidental homicide. The law of *qisas* is the law of equity, not the

law of reciprocity, and cannot be translated as "revenge." The authors do not take into consideration these complexities.

Most of the case studies provided reflect the cultural concepts of certain families and communities as opposed to the values embodied in Islam. Thus the very title is problematic, as it contradicts its contents. The book is supposed to be about Islam and social work, and yet it does not distinguish between Islam and culture. It might have been best to title it *Muslims and Social Work*, since Islam is one thing while Muslims are another thing all together.

Besides failing to appropriately address the influence of culture on behavior, the authors also describe certain customs as Islamic when they are not. A good example of confusing Islam and culture is the phenomenon of genital mutilation, which the authors describe as a *sunnah* (p. 132); in reality, it represents a pre-Islamic pagan African practice that has no basis whatsoever in the Qur'an or the authentic hadiths.

Although the authors provide some important guidelines to help social workers deal with Muslim clients, it is well-known that individuals from the same culture and religion differ greatly. Hence, one cannot apply the guidelines given to every single Muslim individual or family. Rather, social workers need to treat each client as an individual.

Finally, the publisher's claim that *Islam and Social Work* is "the only book specifically about social work with Muslims communities" does not pass the test of a simple search engine. Although there were far fewer studies on the subject several decades ago, an enormous amount of scholarship has been published dealing specifically with this topic in English, French, German, Spanish, and Arabic, among other languages.

In spite of its shortcomings in both style and content, *Islam and Social Work* does expose social workers to a critically important subject: the difficulties faced by Muslims when attempting to integrate into western culture while, at the same time, preserving their Islamic values. This work by Crabtree, Husain, and Spalek may help expand the horizons of some social workers, thereby helping them view Muslims as ordinary human beings with hopes and aspirations, as opposed to opponents or enemies of western civilization. The authors, in particular, should be praised for presenting a more humanized image of Muslim communities, something that stands in stark contrast to the stereotypes that saturate the mass media.

Rachida Bejja
Instructor of Languages and Literatures
Eastern New Mexico University, Portales, New Mexico