

Sondos Kholaki. *Musings of a Muslim Chaplain*. Independently published: 2020.

Sondos Kholaki shares the deepest parts of her soul in her debut book, *Musings of a Muslim Chaplain* (2020), as a hospital chaplain student in Southern California. Her book, winner of the 2021 Daybreak Press Book Awards: Non-Fiction Books, is a compilation of her journal entries from 2016 to 2019 while she served as a clinical pastoral education (CPE) student at an American hospital in Southern California and a Master of Divinity (MDiv) student at the Bayan Islamic Graduate School to become a chaplain. Divided into eight chapters, she interweaves her visits with both hospital patients and staff members with her own life as a mother, student, and servant of God, thereby bringing readers into her warm heart and curious mind as a practicing Muslima and one of the few visible hijab-wearing students.

The author models vulnerability in sharing entries that may be uncomfortable to read, and yet offers poignant lessons. For example, the chapter entitled “Returning” is about death and her various interactions with patients, their families, and her own confrontation with it. One such entry, written in August 2019, states: “Several attempts at resuscitation. Family’s heartbreaking realization that the end is here. Clinicians’ flurry of action settles into an abrupt, eerie stillness. Eyes on the monitor as the soul makes its transition. A family’s tearful goodbye. One last pleading to ‘Wake up, please!’ Doctor calling time. Chaplain requests a moment of silence. A body. A shell. Another soul returns to its Maker” (p. 52). This short recount of a patient’s death is both powerful and hard to read.

Indeed, suffering is one of the themes running throughout the book. Everyone who comes into the hospital is suffering from something, a fact that causes her to write repeatedly that reviving the *sunnah* of compassion is of utmost importance. When Kholaki is with patients, she appreciates the privilege it is to be with them as the “intimate stranger,” a term used in chaplaincy to describe the chaplain as someone who journeys with a person they may never meet again in an intimate way, especially in times of need and distress, such as in a clinical setting.

Other highlights from Kholaki’s book include her attempt to find the good in everyone, an important part of her Islamic theology, which is a life-giving theology. She hopes for the best in God’s plan for people, treats with compassion those whom she encounters, and writes about how they become her teacher. In other words, she always tries to learn from the interactions she has with patients, family, and community.

I learned something beneficial from her: how she found the five love languages, a concept to understand oneself and one’s romantic partner developed by Gary Chapman, to be like the five pillars of Islam. Words of affirmation is the *shahāda* (the testimony of faith and that Muhammad [pbuh] is God’s final messenger); quality time is prayer (*ṣalāh*); physical touch is fasting (*ṣawm*), because one physically feels the worship; giving gifts is almsgiving (*zakāt*); and acts of service is the pilgrimage to Makkah (*ḥajj*). Kholaki reminds her readers that each pillar helps us connect to God in different ways, just like the five love

languages can help spouses understand each other better. Indeed, it is her ability to make connections between what she learns as a chaplain and in her faith, finding wisdom in what chaplaincy teaches her and what she knows about Islam.

The dates of Kholaki's entries reveal that they occurred during Donald Trump's presidency. She shares a few encounters with patients that one may recognize from the political climate of his term. Nevertheless, the author uses both humor and seeking wisdom in the interactions, while trying to see the best in others. During one of her days in the hospital, a fellow chaplain tells her that she is the most normal Muslim he has ever met. Kholaki writes, "Folks, we've got some work to do if he thinks I'm the normal one" (p. 27). I laughed out loud at this one, especially as a fellow chaplain! It is also perhaps because of Kholaki's faith in God and sincere love of the Prophet (pbuh) that she can serve as a chaplain to all types of patients during an intense time of anti-Muslim racism, especially under former President Trump.

The audience for this book is vast – Muslims, Muslim chaplains, people of all religious backgrounds, and people searching for God. It would even be an appropriate text for a chaplaincy course, including those dealing with interfaith chaplaincy and Islamic chaplaincy. In an age where American individualism is growing, *Musings of a Muslim Chaplain* is a reminder that caring for oneself and the community need not be bifurcated. Kholaki's writing softens hearts and teaches the reader of how a deeply rooted faith, Islam, inspires a Muslim chaplain to be a chaplain to all of humanity.

Review by Nora Zaki

Nora Zaki is the founder of MyMuslimChaplain.com, a consulting company that offers services to institutions of higher education, prisons, hospitals, and other places where Muslims are a substantial population but lack needed representation. Zaki, who has been a Muslim chaplain at Vassar and Bard Colleges and interfaith chaplain at Dominican University, has earned a Master of Divinity from the University of Chicago and is currently pursuing an MA in Islamic Studies from the Bayan Islamic Graduate School, based in the Chicago Theological Seminary. She has studied the Islamic sciences and Arabic in Morocco, Egypt, and Jordan. Learn more about her work at www.mymuslimchaplain.com or follow her on Instagram at @mymuslimchaplain.