Does Islam Have Its Own Tradition of Spiritual Care? The Twelve Principles of Spiritual Care in the Muhammadan Model

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Does Islam Have Its Own Tradition of Spiritual Care?

The pastoral-care movement in North America emerged in the early twentieth century, beginning with Anton Boisen's 1925 integration of clergy into clinical settings. Over the decades, it developed into a pragmatic, supervised model of religious care, closely tied to Protestant seminaries and their theology. In parallel, many Muslims in the United States encountered two intersecting developments. First, a minority stream of leadership, who self-identified with the *salaf* (early Muslims) while emphasizing law and ḥadīth, gained disproportionate influence in the context of the American Islam of the 1980s and 1990s. Second, pathways for chaplaincy training remained largely unavailable in Muslim institutions. Many aspiring chaplains therefore studied in Christian seminaries, absorbing Protestant frameworks of pastoral care.

This convergence shaped a distinct landscape: Muslims seeking guidance in spiritual care often looked outside of their own tradition, while those inside the tradition sometimes found themselves presented with a pedagogy that was legalistic, textually literalist, and lacking in compassion. By privileging a method of literal ḥadīth extraction over a broad Sīra-based framework and by marginalizing the ethical architectures of *taṣawwuf* and the *adab* literatures, this pedagogy left gaps precisely in the skills most vital to pastoral work, namely that of gentleness, empathy, and the ability to accompany others in their struggles. The result was often a harsh style of practice, one that shaped communities too often by fear and exclusion rather than by presence and care.

Against this backdrop, a constructive question arises: Does Islam possess its own tradition of spiritual care? In my view, the answer is unequivocally yes. It begins with the Prophet Muhammad himself, whose practice as Messenger, teacher, and guide embodied compassion, wisdom, and long-term vision in his dealings with his early community, or *salaf.* He inspired his companions through love and a deep spirituality that transformed the harshest of desert Arabs into God-loving tender souls imbued with the dignity of their newfound faith, which they sought to share far and wide. Had he been only a political leader or strategist, Islam would never have taken root so deeply across such diverse societies. The presence of the Prophet Muhammad was truly transformative and those who were changed by his companionship became vessels of change themselves. This pattern of

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spiritual companionship, known as *ṣuḥba*, has been transmitted from one generation to the next up to the present day.

This paper seeks to recover and articulate that legacy through highlighting what I call Twelve Muhammadan Principles of Spiritual Care. By "Muhammadan," I mean *al-manhaj al-Muḥammadiyya*, which refers to the Prophet's way of being and acting and not the pejorative Orientalist label "Mohammadan" once used in English. To center the Prophet in this way is not merely rhetorical. Just as Christian pastoral care derives inspiration from the model of Jesus as shepherd, Islamic spiritual care finds its paradigm in the Prophet's companionship, guidance, and mercy. To neglect this is to lose sight of Islam's own resources for pastoral care and to risk seeking in other traditions what already lies at the heart of our own.

What, then, were the principles of caring for the soul that the Prophet Muhammad embodied? In other words, what was his embodied theology or the lived pattern of presence, counsel, consolation, reconciliation, and formation by which he nurtured hearts and communities? The Sīra literature reveals these patterns of behavior, which can inform spiritual care frameworks today. They are not only useful for Muslim spiritual caregivers but constitute a Muhammadan form of embodied theology that can inspire chaplains and religious leaders across faith traditions.

Twelve Muhammadan Principles of Spiritual Care

Principle 1: Do No Harm

"Do no harm" is the foundational principle of the Muhammadan model of spiritual care, upon which all other principles rest. Carrie Doehring, in *The Practice of Pastoral Care* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), distinguishes between "life-giving" and "life-limiting" lived theologies. Life-limiting theologies foster fear and shame in one's relationship with God and diminish the role of faith in daily life. In the Muslim context, this can lead to perceiving God primarily as a harsh judge poised to punish even minor mistakes, while neglecting the sacred tradition (*ḥadīth qudsī)* that affirms that God's mercy surpasses His wrath, and overlooking that Muslims begin their actions in the name of the Merciful (al-Raḥmān) and Compassionate (al-Raḥīm), not in the name of the Compeller (al-Jabbār), the Avenger (al-Muntaqim), or the Judge (al-Ḥakam). Another *ḥadīth qudsī* reminds us: God the Exalted said: "I am as My servant thinks of Me, and I am with him when he remembers Me" (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 7405; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2675).

When Muslims reverse Islam's mercy-based orientation by emphasizing God's *jalālī* (majestic, awe-inspiring) attributes over His *jamālī* (beautiful, merciful) qualities, they risk cultivating a relationship with Islam rooted in fear and scarcity. This inhibits their ability to nurture love for God, the Prophet Muhammad, and the religion itself. By contrast, Doehring describes life-giving theologies as those that emphasize compassion, enabling spiritual caregivers to "alleviate the punitive judgment, internalized prejudices, and/or spiritual anxiety that cut people off from love—self-love, God's love, relational and communal love" (Doehring 2015, 10).

Recognizing how these Islamic teachings align with foundational sources in pastoral and spiritual care highlights their universality. Examining how the Prophet loved, lived, taught, and guided his community through understanding the Sīra can empower Muslim chaplains and imams to become more effective caregivers. In the past, such teachings were transmitted through *ṣuḥba* (spiritual companionship). Today, however, they must be articulated more explicitly to support contemporary training in spiritual care.

When we consider how Islam spread across the world, a strikingly consistent pattern emerges. In Indonesia, the Wali Songo—the Nine Saints (15th–16th century CE)—introduced Islam by harmonizing it with local culture in ways that complemented, rather than conflicted with, foundational Islamic teachings. In Central Asia, figures such as Najm al-Dīn al-Kubrā (d. 618/1221), Bahāʾ al-Dīn Naqshband (d. 791/1389), and Aḥmad Yasawī (d. 562/1166) became exemplars of this same spirit, just as in China we find thinkers like Wang Daiyu (d. ca. 1076/1660) and Liu Zhi (d. 1148/1730).

Islam first took root in Persia and Iraq not by coercion but through the presence of scholars, teachers, and lovers of God (*awliyāʾ*) whose lives embodied humility and devotion to God. Figures such as Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) in Basra, al-Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. 298/910) in Baghdad, Shaqīq al-Balkhī (d. 194/810) in Khurasan, and Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (d. 261/874) in northern Iran conveyed Islam through their compassion, sincerity, and spiritual discipline, attracting people who saw in them a radiant model of faith. Alongside these pioneers of early Islam, Imām Abū Ḥanīfa of Kufa (d. 150/767) shaped the intellectual and legal imagination of new Muslims. His emphasis on reasoning (*raʾy*) and flexibility within the framework of the law resonated with diverse local populations, allowing Islam to be embraced not as a foreign imposition but as a living faith responsive to human circumstances and cultural realities.

What united these diverse geographies was not conquest or compulsion, but the transformative presence of those who carried the Prophet's example into new lands. People who encountered these teachers, preachers, and Sufis were struck by their spiritual depth and moral beauty. Hearts were moved to the core and were stirred by a longing to share in what they embodied. Many willingly changed the course of their lives and even their faith itself because they fell in love with the spiritual guides, honest merchants, devout scholars, and common folk whose character and presence revealed Islam as something extraordinary and worth emulating.

This was no coincidence. The compassion and gentleness through which Islam spread into new lands were rooted in the teachings and practice of the Prophet Muhammad himself. The Qurʾān reminds him: "If you had been harsh or hard-hearted, they would have dispersed from around you" (Qurʾān 3:159), indicating that his demeanor was the very opposite of harsh and hard-hearted. It was marked by softness, patience, and approachability. The Prophet's conduct as depicted in the Sīra provides countless other examples.

When a man came confessing that he had broken his fast intentionally during Ramadan, the Prophet first instructed him to free a slave. When the man said he could not, the Prophet prescribed fasting two consecutive months. When the man explained he was unable to do even that, the Prophet instructed him to feed sixty poor people. When he admitted he had nothing to give, the Prophet placed dates in his hands and prescribed that

he feed his own family. Each step lightened the burden until it became possible to fulfill, never crushing the man with impossibility. This spirit of compassion and accommodation was not peripheral but rather it was the essence of the Prophet Muhammad's teachings. Islam spread because it was lived with mercy, and that mercy was faithfully transmitted through his companions and their heirs, continuing to our present day. For Muslim caregivers today, recovering this legacy means recognizing that true orthodoxy lies in gentleness, dignity, and spiritual presence derived from much worship (*ʿibāda*), which were the very qualities that carried Islam from Mecca and Medina to the farthest reaches of the world.

In terms of the principle of "do no harm," the greatest injury a Muslim leader can inflict upon those under their care is to push them further away from faith. In the Islamic tradition, there is no loss that is more painful or more consequential than the loss of one's connection to God. Religious leadership, therefore, is a sacred trust (*amāna*). One might object saying: Does not the Qurʾānic imperative of *amr bi-l-maʿrūf wa-nahy ʿan al-munkar*, or commanding the good and forbidding the wrong, oblige us to speak out whenever we see something contrary to Islamic teachings? The answer may be yes, but it is accompanied by a critical qualification. These duties must be exercised with wisdom, for the Qurʾān itself guides us to measure our actions by their consequences, not simply their outward form. Commanding the good may take many expressions such as a smile of encouragement, a moment of silence, one's presence in a gathering that strengthens virtue, or one's absence from a setting of vice. Similarly, forbidding the wrong may manifest in kindness or restraint rather than blunt condemnation. Indeed, what appears outwardly as commanding the good can in reality become a form of commanding the wrong if it is expressed in ways that are harsh, ill-timed, or beyond the capacity of the listener to receive—because the teleological effect of such an act is to repel people from goodness rather than to draw them toward it.

The Qurʾān itself provides explicit evidence for this principle saying, "Do not revile those they call upon besides God, lest in their hostility and ignorance they revile God" (Qurʾān 6:108). Polytheism (*shirk*) is considered the gravest of sins in Islam, yet here believers are instructed to refrain from cursing idols—not because idolatry is defensible, but because of the harmful consequences such cursing would provoke. In this verse, the Qurʾān frames silence itself as a form of *amr bi-l-maʿrūf*, teaching that the measure of commanding right and forbidding wrong lies in its impact on the listener, not merely in the correctness of the words themselves. This distinction underscores the difference between issuing a sound *fiqh* ruling and offering sound pastoral guidance: the former pertains to legal accuracy, while the latter requires sensitivity to context, timing, and the spiritual welfare of the seeker. Both have their place, and religious wisdom lies in discerning which is called for in a given moment.

Thus, spiritual caregivers and Muslim leaders are warned not to confuse theological or juridical precision with pastoral efficacy. The Qurʾān shows that true religious counsel is determined by whether it draws a person nearer to God. To be the cause of pushing someone out of faith—however accurate one's words may appear—is to betray the trust of leadership and risk accountability before God, just as a negligent doctor is held responsible for harming rather than healing. The guiding principle, then, is that no form of religious

counsel should result in alienating people from their faith. This does not mean misrepresenting the foundations of Islam; rather, it means presenting them with wisdom, compassion, and an awareness of human circumstance. Only then can *amr bi-l-maʿrūf wa-nahy ʿan al-munkar* fulfill its purpose of cultivating faith rather than undermining it.

We see this principle of *do no harm* and the importance of measuring the consequences of one's actions illustrated vividly in the Prophet's own life. One example from the Sīra recounts a bedouin man who accused the Prophet of being stingy and of failing to pay his debts. The companions, outraged by this insult, wished to retaliate, but the Prophet restrained them. He explained that had he responded in kind, the man might have been driven away from Islam, saying in effect, "Had I listened to you, he would have entered the Fire." The point was not the truth of the accusation—for of course the Prophet was neither stingy nor dishonest—but the awareness that defending his personal honor in a harsh manner or allowing his companions to do so would have alienated the man and pushed him further from faith. Instead, the Prophet chose gentleness, demonstrating that the highest priority of religious leadership is to protect a person's connection to God, even when one's own status is questioned. This model reiterates the principle that the greatest harm a religious leader can cause is to be the reason someone loses faith, and therefore all counsel and action must be measured against this standard.

The Prophet's practice consistently emphasized gentleness in leadership. When he sent out ambassadors such as Muʿādh b. Jabal to represent Islam, he instructed them: "Make things easy and do not make them difficult; give glad tidings and do not drive people away (*yassirū wa lā tuʿassirū, bashshirū wa lā tunaffirū*)" (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 69; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1733). While this paper will return to this teaching in more detail later, here it is sufficient to note that its spirit reflects the foundational principle of *do no harm*. The Prophet deliberately chose messengers known for their kindness and approachability, understanding that the manner of conveying Islam was as important as the message itself. This principle was later codified in Islamic jurisprudence through the maxim *lā ḍarar wa-lā ḍirār* ("Do not harm and do not reciprocate harm"), which became a cornerstone of Islamic law and ethics. In this way, the Prophet modeled what today might be called emotional intelligence in leadership, which manifested as a deep attunement to the needs, vulnerabilities, and capacities of those he addressed. For this reason, the principle of *do no harm* stands as the foundation upon which all other principles of Islamic spiritual care rest.

Principle 2: Meet People Where They Are, Not Where You Think They Should Be

This principle is expressed in the maxim often attributed to the Prophet Muhammad and in some sources to ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib saying, "Speak to people according to their intellects (*khāṭibū al-nās ʿalā qadarī ʿuqūlihim*)."[1] Its meaning is reflected in the Prophet's practice: He met people where they were and responded in ways suited to their circumstances. In another example, when people asked him, "What is Islam?" he gave different answers

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[1] This saying is attributed to ʿAlī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 127 using slightly different wording, but with the same meaning: "Speak to people only according to their level of knowledge. Would you like for Allah and His Messenger to be denied (*Ḥaddithū al-nās bi-mā yaʿrifūna, atuḥibbūna an yukaththaba Allāhu wa rasūluhu*)?"

based on whom he was speaking to. To some, he defined it succinctly as submission to God and the testimony of faith; to others, he set out the five pillars of Islam; and in the famous ḥadīth of Jibrīl, he embedded it within a larger teaching on *īmān* and *iḥsān* (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 50; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, nos. 8, 10). When a Bedouin asked what he must do to enter Paradise, the Prophet told him to worship God alone, perform the prayers, give *zakāt*, and fast in Ramadan. The man replied, "By Him who sent you with the truth, I will do no more and no less." After he departed, the Prophet said, "If he is truthful, he will enter Paradise" (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 46; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, nos. 11–15). At the same time, the Prophet warned his companions that because of the privilege of their closeness to him, they would be held accountable for abandoning even a small portion of his teachings, whereas later generations would be rewarded for clinging even to a tenth of it. We find in a ḥadīth of the Prophet, "You are in a time such that if one of you abandons a tenth of what you have been commanded, he will perish; but there will come a time when whoever among them acts upon a tenth of what he has been commanded will be saved" (*Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2267).

The Qurʾān also conveys this principle in its address to the Mothers of the Believers: "O wives of the Prophet, if any of you commit a clear immorality, the punishment will be doubled for her… but whoever among you devoutly obeys God and His Messenger and does righteousness—We will give her double reward" (Qurʾān 33:30–31). In each of these cases, expectations were calibrated to context, opportunity, and spiritual capacity.

For spiritual caregivers, this principle has direct implications. God judges each person according to their circumstances, and leaders are called to emulate this divine wisdom by meeting people where they are. To speak to a new Muslim with the expectations appropriate for a lifelong practitioner would risk overwhelming and alienating them, thereby violating the first principle of *do no harm*. Conversely, to treat a devout Muslim of decades as though they had just entered the faith would also be harmful, denying them the higher standards appropriate to their spiritual maturity. True spiritual care requires discernment: to recognize the seeker's stage, to speak in ways they can hear, and to provide guidance that nurtures rather than burdens. In this way, meeting people where they are safeguards the balance between mercy and accountability that lies at the heart of prophetic leadership modeled by the Prophet Muhammad.

Principle 3: Connect Before You Correct

The Prophet Muhammad modeled a way of addressing mistakes that preserved dignity and fostered growth. He was known to say, "What is the matter with people who do such and such?" He was choosing indirect speech rather than confronting individuals by name or embarrassing them in public. This tactful method corrected behavior without shaming the person, and it was effective precisely because it was grounded in the strong personal connections he had cultivated with his companions. It was these bonds of trust and affection that created space for transformation. The Prophet's example teaches that the ability to discern whether words will heal or harm depends first on knowing the person and their context. Without a relationship, guidance risks becoming judgmental rather than pastoral.

Connect before you correct[2] is a helpful way of remembering that chaplaincy is not about imposing judgment, but about building trust so that counsel, encouragement, or gentle redirection can be received as care.

Today, this principle is often neglected when people rush to admonish strangers in the mosque for perceived errors in prayer or lapses in practice, despite having no relationship with them, sometimes not even knowing their names. Such interactions do not embody *amr bi-l-maʿrūf wa-nahy ʿan al-munkar*, nor do they fulfill the foundational principle of *do no harm*. For Muslim chaplains and religious leaders, the lesson is clear: Guidance and correction must always arise from genuine connection. For it is connection that preserves dignity, opens hearts, and makes care transformative.

Principle 4: Keep Things Simple. Islam is Neither Hard nor Harsh.

A consistent feature of the Prophet Muhammad's spiritual guidance was simplicity and ease. Islam, as he modeled it, was neither harsh nor burdensome. As mentioned earlier, his often-repeated instruction to his companions was: "Make things easy and do not make them difficult; give glad tidings and do not drive people away." This principle established that religious leadership is not about overwhelming people with rigid demands, but about conveying the faith in a way that nurtures hope and accessibility.

We see this clearly in the Prophet's instructions to those he entrusted with teaching new Muslim communities. When sending Muʿādh b. Jabal and Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī to guide converts in Yemen, his advice was precisely this: emphasize ease, encouragement, and good news. In many ways, their role as teachers in unfamiliar contexts mirrors the work of chaplains today, who are often called to serve in pluralist and/or public settings. The Prophet understood that if religion was presented with harshness or judgment, it would drive people away; only through gentleness and simplicity could it take root and flourish.

This prophetic principle stands in stark contrast to the harsh tones and critical language that sometimes dominate contemporary religious discourse. When sermons or public preaching center on fear, shame, or judgment, they risk undermining the prophetic Sunna they claim to uphold. The Prophet's model was to keep faith accessible, hopeful, and encouraging, so that people were drawn in rather than turned away. For spiritual caregivers today, this means that clarity, encouragement, and simplicity are not secondary virtues. Rather, they are the heart of prophetic guidance based on the Muhammadan way.

There is also a practical rule of thumb that reinforces this principle: When advising a general audience on matters where there are valid differences of opinion, one should not present the strictest view as the norm but highlight a more lenient one. This does not mean that a leader cannot personally choose a stricter position for themselves; rather, it reflects a pastoral wisdom that aims to keep people within the broad and welcoming boundaries of Islam without altering its foundations. The purpose is not to narrow religion until people feel excluded, but to keep the path open and accessible while remaining faithful to its teachings. For Muslim chaplains, this requires a solid grounding in the foundational sciences of Islam and the ability to navigate diverse opinions responsibly. Proper

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[2] "Connect before you correct" is a common maxim in counseling and pastoral ministry. See John C. Maxwell, *Developing the Leader Within You* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 116.

knowledge enables caregivers to recognize legitimate differences, to make religion easy without misrepresenting it, and to adapt guidance appropriately to individual circumstances. In contrast, insufficient knowledge often leads to two opposite but equally problematic tendencies: either permitting what is impermissible out of ignorance, or—more commonly—resorting to the strictest possible opinion in every matter "to be safe." In reality, deep Islamic literacy of the tradition produces greater flexibility, not less. A knowledgeable leader is able to discern when a more lenient view is appropriate, especially when strictness would alienate or overwhelm those not yet ready for it.

Principle 5: Be Flexible, Be Diplomatic, Be Easygoing

The Qurʾān explicitly reminds the Prophet Muhammad of the importance of gentleness in leadership when it says, "If you had been harsh or hard-hearted, they would have dispersed from around you" (Qurʾān 3:159). The verse highlights that the Prophet's character was defined by the opposite of callousness and rigidity; he embodied softness, diplomacy, and ease. This quality was also evident in those he appointed as representatives of Islam. When he sent Muṣʿab b. ʿUmayr to Medina as a teacher and ambassador, it was because Muṣʿab was known for his diplomacy and leniency. The Prophet did not choose harsh companions for such roles of representing the faith; he selected those who could embody tact and flexibility.

Similarly, we see in the Sīra that when Jaʿfar b. Abī Ṭālib spoke before the Negus of Abyssinia, he presented true views of the Muslims in regards to their rejection of the divinity of Jesus in a manner that was honest yet careful and framed with wisdom so as not to cause unnecessary offense. The Prophet himself praised the quality of gentleness and approachability, saying, "Shall I not inform you of the one for whom the Fire is forbidden? It is every person who is approachable, gentle, and easygoing (*qarīb, hayyin, layyin, sahl*)" (*Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2488; *Musnad Aḥmad*, no. 3955). Abū Bakr, the Prophet's closest companion, is commonly said to have embodied this prophetic ideal, by being known as *hayyin layyin* (tender-hearted, forbearing), and marked by a softness of spirit that made him deeply beloved among the companions. Taken together, these examples demonstrate a consistent prophetic model: Effective spiritual leadership requires flexibility, diplomacy, and tact, so that truth is conveyed in ways that draw people closer rather than drive them away.

Principle 6: Teach, Advise, and Offer Islamic Learning in Measured Portions That People Can Realistically Handle

Spiritual mentorship is a gradual process, more like a marathon than a sprint. Muslim chaplains are often asked to teach classes on a variety of Islamic topics in university, prison, and community settings. Effective guidance means offering people teaching in portions they can realistically manage, rather than overwhelming them with obligations they are not yet ready to bear. The Qurʾān itself illustrates this principle: Revealed over twenty-three years, its verses introduced legal rulings and moral exhortations step by step, nurturing the companions in a process of *tarbiya* (spiritual upbringing) that allowed them to grow into the religion in a sustainable way. As the Qurʾān says, "And [it is] a Qurʾān which We have

divided so that you might recite it to the people gradually, and We have sent it down in stages" (Qurʾān 17:106).

ʿĀʾisha, the wife of the Prophet, described this pedagogy of gradual growth saying: "The first thing to be revealed was from the shorter *sūra*s, mentioning Paradise and Hell. When the people turned to Islam, then what was *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām* was revealed. If the first thing to be revealed had been, 'Do not drink wine,' they would have said, 'We will never give up wine.' And if it had been revealed, 'Do not commit fornication,' they would have said, 'We will never give up fornication'" (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 4993, on Qurʾān 54:46). The Prophet himself embodied this gradual approach in his counsel to Muʿādh b. Jabal when sending him to Yemen by saying: "Let the first thing to which you call them be the testimony that none has the right to be worshiped but God. If they obey you in that, then inform them that God has enjoined five prayers upon them… If they obey you in that, then inform them that God has made *zakāt* obligatory…" (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 1458).

For Muslim chaplains and leaders, this gradualism is particularly vital when working with new Muslims, young people, or those returning to practice after a period of distance. Moreover, partial practice should not be undervalued; doing something is always better than doing nothing, and often one good action opens the door to others. The task is not to demand perfection immediately, but to encourage sustainable growth by nurturing what is possible today while leaving room for tomorrow's progress. This requires discernment: Withholding too much may deprive people of the practices that nurture growth, while imposing too many rules and expectations at once may overwhelm them and drive them away. Hence the need to connect before correcting, as well as to understand the individual's capacity and then to teach in measured installments they can handle. In this way, spiritual development becomes steady, sustainable, and rooted in the prophetic model.

Principle 7: Be Culturally Relevant

The Prophet Muhammad consistently demonstrated sensitivity to culture and custom, affirming practices that did not contradict Islam and incorporating them into the life of the Muslim community. In the Sīra, we see that when Ethiopians performed a cultural dance inside the mosque, he did not condemn it as inappropriate or prohibited (*ḥarām*). Rather, he embraced their expression and even watched along with his wife ʿĀʾisha. This spirit of openness signaled that cultural practices, far from being threats to religion, could coexist with and enrich Islamic life so long as they did not conflict with its foundational principles. Similarly, in the Constitution of Medina (*Ṣaḥīfat al-Madīna*), the Prophet retained existing tribal structures and customary practices, such as how clans paid blood money, rather than erasing them. In military campaigns, he preserved the traditional role of particular clans carrying banners, recognizing the importance of continuity and identity. Culture, in his Sunna, was not seen as an obstacle to faith but as a vessel through which faith could be lived.

This perspective is also reflected in Islamic jurisprudence, where ʿ*urf* (custom) is a recognized consideration in deriving rulings. Imām al-Shāfiʿī famously revised aspects of his legal opinions after moving from Iraq to Egypt, in response to new cultural and social contexts. Historically, Muslims have never viewed culture as inherently harmful; rather, Islam has been embedded in and sustained by cultural practices. In fact, cultural identity

often maintained a sense of Muslim belonging even when religious practice waned. By contrast, the suspicion of culture as a threat to religion is a modern distortion.

For Muslim chaplains and caregivers, the lesson is clear: effective guidance requires an understanding of the culture of the people one serves. Culture here does not merely mean food, clothing, or art, but the deeper norms, patterns, and values that shape communities and institutions. Police forces, prisons, universities, hospitals, and even specific hospital wards each carry their own culture. To be effective, the Muslim caregiver must learn to navigate these environments, to be relatable within them, and to embody the Prophet's example of affirming cultural practices that do not contradict faith. In this way, cultural relevance becomes a cornerstone of the Muhammadan model of spiritual care.

Principle 8: Serve with Political Intelligence and Strategize for Long-Term Success

Effective spiritual leadership requires not only compassion and knowledge but also political intelligence; the ability to read situations, honor community dynamics, and strategize for long-term success. The Prophet Muhammad consistently demonstrated this quality in his leadership. When Mecca was conquered, he honored existing social structures, granting protection to the household of Abū Sufyān and extending respect to those with recognized positions of influence. In doing so, he demonstrated the principle of *muʾallafati qulūbihim*: strengthening the hearts of those new or vulnerable in faith by offering support and recognition until their commitment could take root.

The Treaty of Ḥudaybiyya provides another striking example of the Prophet's political intelligence. When the Quraysh refused to acknowledge him as "the Messenger of God" in the treaty and insisted instead on naming him as "Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh," he accepted the compromise, recognizing that to insist on titles would jeopardize the greater goal of peace and long-term stability. Similarly, when they objected to the formula *Bismillāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*, he agreed to omit it for the sake of preserving the agreement. These concessions were not weaknesses; they were strategic choices that secured the treaty and ultimately paved the way for Islam's expansion.

When the Prophet Muhammad sent letters to foreign rulers, he addressed them with the honorific title ʿAẓīm ("Great [one] of…"). Thus, he wrote to Heraclius addressing him as ʿAẓīm al-Rūm (Great one of Byzantium), to Khosrow as ʿAẓīm Fāris (Great one of Persia), and to al-Muqawqis as ʿAẓīm al-Qibṭ (Great one of the Copts), beginning each letter with the formula: "From Muhammad, the servant and Messenger of God, to [name], the Great of [his people]. Peace be upon those who follow guidance" (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 7; Ibn Hishām 1955, 4:268; Ibn Saʿd 1904, 260). These exchanges were not one-sided: The Prophet also accepted gifts from rulers who corresponded with him, a practice consistent with his own saying, "If I am invited… I respond; and if I am given a gift… I accept" (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 5178; see also *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 2585 and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1077). In the "Year of Delegations" (*ʿĀm al-Wufūd*), he similarly honored tribal leaders, teaching his companions to give people of social rank their due respect.

This principle has clear applications for Muslim leaders and chaplains today. Serving communities requires awareness of existing hierarchies and honoring those who carry respect such as elders, founders, and leaders without dismissing their roles. It also requires a particular attentiveness to the power and influence of women in community life.

In many contexts, women organize programs, sustain institutions, and shape family decisions around financial support and charitable giving. To alienate or marginalize women is not only unjust but also counterproductive, creating barriers to communal trust and long-term success. The Prophet's example reminds us that spiritual leadership must be paired with diplomacy, respect for cultural and social structures, and the ability to think beyond the immediate moment toward the broader flourishing of the community.

Principle 9: Lead with Affection, Respect, and Compassion

No religious leadership can succeed without genuine love for the people one serves. The Qurʾān describes the Anṣār of Medina with the words, "They love those who came to them" (Qurʾān 59:9), highlighting that genuine affection was at the heart of their hospitality and spiritual excellence. For Muslim leaders and chaplains, this principle is indispensable: If one harbors disdain or condescension toward a community, people will inevitably sense it. Even polite words, smiles, or gestures of friendliness cannot conceal underlying judgment. The human heart perceives authenticity, and without sincere respect, guidance fails to penetrate. Thus, spiritual caregivers must engage in self-reflection and self-discipline, working on their own *nafs* to cultivate an outlook that seeks the good in those they serve. Only then can their words and presence bear fruit.

The Prophet Muhammad exemplified this principle throughout his life. He was described in the Qurʾān as "a mercy to the worlds" (Qurʾān 21:107). Numerous ḥadīths portray the Prophet Muhammad as continuously praying for his community saying "*ummatī, ummatī*" while showing unfailing compassion even to those who opposed him. The Sīra literature is replete with accounts of his love for his companions and their reciprocal devotion to him. This mutual affection was not incidental but central to the Muhammadan model of *ṣuḥba*, or his spiritual companionship, through which transformation occurred. Within the broader Islamic tradition, this principle was further articulated by leading scholars of spirituality. Imām al-Ghazālī and al-Qushayrī, among others, wrote extensively on *maḥabba* (love of God and those who love God), treating it as the foundational step on the path of spiritual development. Their works demonstrate that affection, respect, and compassion are not peripheral virtues but essential qualities of leadership. For Muslim chaplains today, embodying this principle ensures that care is not merely instructional but transformative, rooted in the Prophet's own model of merciful presence.

Principle 10: Do Not Seek Personal Gain from the Community You Serve

The Qurʾān also describes the Anṣār of Medina saying, "They find in their breasts no need for that which they give" (Qurʾān 59:9). This verse illustrates that they supported the Muhājirūn selflessly, without desire for material benefit or personal advantage. For Muslim leaders and chaplains, this principle is critical: Religious service must not become a means of extracting favors or seeking personal gain. Accepting special treatment, whether in the form of money, gifts, or even status and recognition, constitutes a conflict of interest that undermines one's ability to serve with fairness and sincerity. The Qurʾān further warns of this kind of transactional goodness saying, "Do not invalidate your charities with reminders

(*mann*) and harm" (Qurʾān 2:264). To expect gratitude, privileges, or special recognition in exchange for service is a form of *mann*, reminding others of one's good deeds in order to secure something in return, as mentioned in the verse above. Such expectations reveal an intention tainted by ego rather than one that does good purely for the sake of God.

Classical Muslim spiritual teachers often cautioned: "Do not use your religion to increase your worldly life." In the Naqshbandī tradition, for example, Bahaʾ al-Dīn al-Naqshband and his successors required that their disciples earn a living through a trade before coming to them for spiritual guidance out of fear that their students might be tempted to use their own spiritual guidance of others as a source of income. The great masters of Bukhara, who were known as the *Khwājagān*, were not professional preachers but artisans, merchants, and craftsmen whose spiritual influence extended across Central Asia, Anatolia, India, and beyond. This model ensured that spiritual teaching remained sincere and untainted by financial dependency on followers. Even the guilds of the Silk Road reflected this ethos: blacksmiths, cloth traders, and woodworkers belonged to *ṭuruq* (orders of Islamic spirituality). They supported themselves through their crafts while seeking spiritual refinement and guiding others free of charge. By contrast, contemporary trends of "scholars for dollars," where religious guidance has often been commodified in American Muslim settings and treated as a transactional profession, present real dangers for spiritual integrity.

This is not to dismiss legitimate employment in public institutions, where chaplains are protected by clear ethical guidelines and oversight. Rather, the concern is with dependence on direct and personal favors or transactional preaching that compromises intention. In the Islamic tradition, intention (*niyya*) is central to the validity and value of good actions. The Prophet taught, "Actions are judged by intentions" (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 1; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1907). Outwardly sound acts lose their value if they are pursued for worldly status or gain. Thus, the chaplain or religious leader must continually struggle with the *nafs*, guarding against subtle desires for recognition, privilege, or reward from the community they serve. In an Islamic framework of caregiving, to serve sincerely for the sake of God means resisting these temptations and ensuring that one's guidance remains pure, free from conflicts of interest, and rooted in trust.

Principle 11: Honor Confidentiality and Do Not Seek Out Faults

The Prophet Muhammad taught his companions that confidentiality is a sacred trust. In a ḥadīth recorded by Abū Dāwūd, he said: "When a man speaks a word and then turns aside [or departs], it is a trust" (*Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, no. 4868). This teaching is often summarized in the maxim *al-majālisu bi-l-amāna* which means "gatherings are a trust." In practice, this meant that what was shared in private was not to be disclosed to others.

In a modern context, this principle applies equally to private conversations, written correspondence, and even digital communication, i.e., forwarding messages or sharing screenshots without permission violates the spirit of trust that undergirds authentic relationships. The Prophet Muhammad refused to entertain gossip about his companions, saying: "Do not let anyone convey to me anything about my companions, for I love to come out to you with my heart free of ill will" (*Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, no. 4860; *Jāmiʿ al-Tirmidhī*, no. 3896). In other words, he taught his companions not to violate one another's

trust, whether by disclosing what was shared in confidence or by exposing faults and private matters that ought to remain concealed.

The Qurʾān reinforces this ethic in saying, "Do not spy on one another" (Qurʾān 49:12). The Prophet's conduct during the conquest of Mecca provides a practical demonstration of how he honored people's privacy. While his companions destroyed the public idols in the Kaʿba, they were not allowed to enter people's homes to search for or remove their private idols even though the Prophet would have undoubtedly known that many homes still possessed idols in them. He trusted that once the public symbols of idolatry were gone, private remnants would eventually fade. This restraint reflected his conviction that faith is a growth process and that forcing religion upon people would only weaken, not strengthen, their belief. Compulsion produces outward conformity but often at the cost of inner conviction.

Islamic ethics texts also record that during one of his nightly patrols, ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb climbed over a wall and came upon a man engaged in wrongdoing. When ʿUmar sought to confront him, the man replied: "O Commander of the Believers, if I have disobeyed God once, you have disobeyed Him three times: you spied, whereas God has forbidden spying: 'Do not spy' (Qurʾān 49:12); you entered by climbing over the roof, whereas God has said, 'Enter houses by their doors' (Qurʾān 2:189); and you entered without greeting, whereas God has said, 'Do not enter houses other than your own until you seek permission and greet their people' (Qurʾān 24:27)" (Al-Ghazālī 2010, 3:372–73). Hearing this, ʿUmar left him, requiring only that he repent. Preserved in al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, this account illustrates that even rulers may not violate privacy in order to expose sin.

This principle resonates strongly with modern law, where evidence obtained through intrusion or surveillance is often deemed illegitimate. Just as contemporary legal systems require warrants for searches, the prophetic model emphasizes that confidentiality and respect for private life are integral to justice. For Muslim leaders and chaplains today, the lesson is clear: Safeguard confidentiality, honor private spaces, and resist the temptation to expose or seek out the hidden faults of others. In doing so, they embody the Muhammadan ethic that trust and integrity form the foundation of spiritual care.

Principle 12: Cultivate Humility

Humility is a cornerstone of Islamic spiritual care and leadership. To practice it means recognizing that those one serves may, in fact, be closer to God in ways that are not outwardly visible. A person may carry hidden virtues such as quiet acts of kindness, private worship, or sincere repentance that others cannot see. Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh al-Iskandarī, in his *al-Ḥikam al-ʿAṭāʾiyya*, encapsulates this insight in one of his sayings, "A sin which engenders humility and brokenness before God may be better than an act of obedience that breeds arrogance." For those engaged in spiritual care, such humility serves as a safeguard against arrogance and a reminder that true spiritual rank is known only to God.

The Prophet Muhammad modeled humility throughout his life, a quality highlighted in the *shamāʾil* literature. He would sit wherever there was space in a gathering, so that a newcomer could not immediately distinguish him from among his companions. On one occasion, when a man approached him in fear, the Prophet reassured him, saying:

"Take it easy, for I am not a king; I am only the son of a woman who ate dried meat" (Al-Tirmidhī 1987, no. 331).

Such examples demonstrate that authentic religious leadership is not about self-elevation, but about service. For chaplains and spiritual leaders, this humility entails recognizing that the time, knowledge, and compassion they offer are not theirs to claim in the first place. They are divine gifts entrusted to them, and sharing them is a form of *zakāt*. As the saying goes, *zakātu al-ʿilmi nashruhu* which means "the alms of knowledge is to spread it." Likewise, the *zakāt* of health is to use it in service of others, and the *zakāt* of nearness to God is to guide and support His creation.

This perspective deepens when one realizes the Islamic worldview that whatever is given to others such as time, energy, service, or knowledge is in fact the *ḥaqq* (the rightful due) of those who receive it. Furthermore, those who benefit are not merely recipients but sources of divine reward to the one who is giving, for they provide the opportunity for the caregiver to draw nearer to God. In this sense, the caregiver is not doing something extraordinary but simply fulfilling the rights of others. To view service in this way guards against the *mann* that was discussed earlier, or what the Qurʾān refers to as reminding others of favors and by extension expecting recognition or gain. It ensures that one seeks no acknowledgment except from God, recognizing that true greatness lies in humility, and true service lies in giving people what is already theirs by right.

Conclusion

Together, these twelve principles form a Muhammadan framework of spiritual care that is rooted in the embodied theology of the Prophet as manifested in numerous parts of the Qurʾān, Sīra, and the lived wisdom of the Islamic tradition. From the Prophet's example we learn that effective leadership is not defined by authority or rigidity, but by mercy, humility, tact, and the ability to meet people where they are. Spiritual care is thus an act of stewardship, not ownership: It is about protecting faith rather than endangering it, offering guidance that uplifts rather than burdens, and serving with sincerity while seeking no gain but God's pleasure. For Muslim chaplains and leaders today, these principles offer both inspiration and direction, reminding us that the heart of Islamic leadership lies not in control, but in compassionate presence, faithful integrity, and service to others as a trust from God. At the same time, the Prophet's example speaks more broadly: His way of embodying care, humility, and mercy provides a resource for chaplains and caregivers of all faiths who seek models of spiritual leadership rooted in dignity and compassion.

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