Reflections on a Master of Divinity (MDiv) Thesis: "Professional Muslim Chaplaincy: Defining a Role for Religious Authority and Leadership in the US Context"

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on where Islamic chaplaincy is lacking and what needs to be improved, particularly when it comes to the religious and professional training of Muslim chaplains. In the US context, chaplains possess a certain level of religious training and authority as perceived by institutions and the general public. Supplemental education and standards through endorsement organizations, such as the Muslim Endorsement Council (MEC), and professional organizations, like the Association of Muslim Chaplains (AMC), help fill in gaps in training for Muslim chaplains and hold a standard of accountability. This support is especially needed, because while imams mostly function within the Muslim community in a mosque setting, where Islamic norms are general practice, Muslim chaplains navigate public and private institutions in the larger society, which sometimes require compromise in how chaplains navigate religious gray areas, such as pastoral touch with non-Muslims.

Keywords: *chaplains, seminary, education, religious authority*

In two books published by Shaykh Mikaeel Ahmed Smith—*With the Heart in Mind: The Moral and Emotional Intelligence of the Prophet (S)* (Qasim Publications, 2021) and *When Hearing Becomes Listening: Prophetic Listening and How It Can Transform the World Within Us and Around Us* (Qasim Publications, 2023)—a framework is given for how Muslim religious leaders who have gone through advanced religious education programs can develop into skilled chaplains and pastoral caregivers. While this is an invaluable resource for the North American Muslim community, we must also address the phenomenon of Muslim chaplains who, although skilled in the Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) process of self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and personal growth, lack the caliber of formal religious education of imams and *ʿālim*s. My road to chaplaincy was different than that of Shaykh Mikaeel and is reflected in the Master of Divinity (MDiv) thesis I completed in 2016 entitled: "Professional Muslim Chaplaincy: Defining a Role for Religious Authority and Leadership in the US Context." The thesis abstract stated:

> This thesis argues that in the US, a Muslim chaplain is located between the *ʿālim*

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> on one side and mental health professionals (such as a social worker) on the other side. Chaplains in the United States serve a role in public institutions (such as hospitals, universities, prisons, and the military) that are characterized as non-denominational or non-religion-specific environments due to the US Constitution's Free Exercise and Establishment clauses. The curriculum in Islamic chaplaincy programs currently do not produce Muslim chaplains with equivalent amounts of knowledge and training at the level of an *ʿālim*, such as deep understanding of Arabic, Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), Qurʾānic commentary (*tafsīr*), ḥadīth, and theology (*ʿaqīda*), nor do these programs train them to work in the same role as that of an imam in a mosque. On the other hand, chaplains are well trained professionals in the areas of spiritual care, spiritual and mental health assessment, rituals and care surrounding life events (such as birth, marriage, and death, as well as grief and trauma), and short-term counseling along with interfaith relations. Chaplains are required to undergo supervised chaplain internships in the form of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) and an increasing number of institutions are requiring board certification through professional guilds, such as the Association of Professional Chaplains. These requirements place chaplains significantly higher in their level of professional authority within areas that a typical *ʿālim* has a lower level of knowledge and training. However, Muslim chaplains are distinguished from social workers in that they do undergo some religious studies and training, and they perform rituals and care informed by their religious tradition, therefore possessing a level of religious authority. This thesis proposes that the landscape of leadership and authority in the US Muslim community requires a future vision that characterizes both Muslim chaplains and imams as professionals who serve in different roles with a complimentary working relationship (imams in private institutions such as mosques, and Muslim chaplains in public institutions such as universities, prisons, hospitals, and the military). As chaplains define their role in religious leadership and authority, the role of the imam, in addition to other religious leadership roles, should become more defined in order to meet the needs of Muslim communities in the US.[1] (Elias 2016)

My journey to chaplaincy did not begin with a formal *ʿālimiyya* or imam program, but included supplemental learning from various Muslim teachers and programs after I realized that the chaplaincy program I had enrolled in was teaching me great pastoral care and counseling skills, but was not an Islamic seminary for foundational religious studies from within the Islamic tradition. While I was learning *about* Islam in the areas of theology, law, scripture, and history from qualified Muslim university professors, I was not learning Islam in the traditional sense of an Islamic seminary curriculum. In contrast, Shaykh Mikaeel describes the *ʿālimiyya* curriculum of Ottoman *madrasa*s, which was divided into: (1) the ancillary sciences (*ʿulūm al-āla*); (2) the philosophical sciences (*ʿulūm al-ḥikmiyya*); and (3) the revelatory sciences (*ʿulūm al-sharīʿa*). He explains that this same structure still exists today in many Muslim countries, such as Egypt, Syria, and throughout South Asia.

[1] This has been edited slightly for clarity and transliteration.

For these students, a framework of Qurʾān memorization and Arabic studies existed that was so thorough that they were not allowed to access the "primary sources, such as the Qurʾān and Hadith literature and the principles of jurisprudence, until one had mastered grammar, rhetoric, and logic" (Smith 2021, 46–47).

My original MDiv thesis, while an argument for Muslim chaplains to have a role of religious authority, also provided an important perspective that still holds true today. Muslim chaplains continue to find themselves on a spectrum of multiple authorities. On the one hand, chaplains are part of secular institutions which provide them with institutional authority by virtue of the position they hold in those institutions. Muslim chaplains navigate persuasive authority as they establish trust and rapport with both Muslims and non-Muslims alike, since chaplains are required to serve all, regardless of religious affiliation or non-affiliation. Chaplains are similar to social workers in carrying a level of professional authority, due to training in the social sciences and mental health care. At the same time, chaplains do engage in religious studies that connect them to the Islamic tradition, lending them some religious authority. As the field of chaplaincy continues to professionalize, more and more Muslim chaplains seek to enhance the above forms of authority through various methods. For example, many Muslim chaplains today choose to pursue the status of BCC (board certified chaplain) with the Association of Professional Chaplains (APC), which carries 50 hours of annual continuing education. Part of the requirement for Muslim chaplains who have achieved BCC is to also maintain ecclesiastical endorsement from a religious endorsing body, since chaplains do carry a level of religious authority in the work that they do.

Reflecting the contrasting journeys which I and Shaykh Mikaeel embarked upon, there are generally two types of chaplains, both with long roads of education. We find religious experts who complete an *ʿālimiyya* curriculum but lack pastoral care and counseling skills. We also find the inverse: those who lack deeper religious expertise but have extensive training in pastoral care and counseling. Oftentimes, Muslims attend Islamic seminaries overseas, as well as North American *ʿālim* programs as more Islamic seminaries become established closer to home, which produce an education that is typically not recognized by Western secular institutions. This can make it difficult for imams to attend Islamic chaplaincy programs, which are typically located in institutions of higher education that require a recognized bachelor's degree. Those Muslims who are accepted into chaplaincy programs at those institutions of higher education often have not gone through a 5-to-6-year *ʿālim* program. This has led to a situation highlighted by Gilliat-Ray, Ali, and Pattison in their book *Understanding Muslim Chaplaincy*:

> The academic requirements and expectations of the Hartford programme have undoubtedly shaped entry into professional Muslim chaplaincy in the USA in recent years. For example, some of our interviewees in the US had liberal arts degrees, professional qualifications in social work or degrees in Arabic and Islamic Studies from American universities. But these academic programmes in Islamic studies would be quite different, in both content and ethos, compared to Muslim institutions offering a traditional Islamic curriculum leading to eventual recognition as an 'alim

> (or 'alima), and usually stressing a strong command of Arabic. (Gilliat-Ray, Ali, and Pattison 2013, 153)

In one of the interviews included in the book, a Muslim chaplain also reflected on the curriculum of Islamic chaplaincy programs in the United States at the time:

> "Number two is that Hartford Seminary [now: Hartford International University for Religion and Peace] does not require Arabic facility. It would be hard for us to find a Jewish seminary that doesn't expect a person to read the Torah in Hebrew. I mean… you expect him or her to at least know enough Arabic to at least recite the Qur'an correctly and maybe do some rudimentary translation? I think it's problematic when the Qur'an is so important to us" (Muslim chaplain, interviewed July 2011). (Gilliat-Ray, Ali, and Pattison 2013, 154)

It is important to note that in the previous decade, Islamic chaplaincy programs have responded to these criticisms and adjusted the requirements of their chaplaincy programs for Muslims. Hartford International School for Religion and Peace (formerly Hartford Seminary) now requires "Language Proficiency in Qur'anic Arabic" as part of their Islamic Chaplaincy Pathway (Hartford International School for Religion and Peace, n.d.). Bayan Islamic Graduate School, which began its Islamic chaplaincy program in 2016, currently requires an intermediate level of Arabic to be completed as a part of their Master of Divinity (MDiv) degree in Islamic Chaplaincy (Bayan Islamic Graduate School, n.d.). However, it remains that a student enrolled in any of these chaplaincy programs is still learning about Islam, Muslims, and the Islamic tradition from what can be argued is an *outsider's perspective*. Even when these courses are taught by faculty who are practicing Muslims, they are required to teach as an "impartial" academic in order for these courses to qualify for graduate level course credit at an accredited university as defined by the US Department of Education—course credits which are required to obtain board certification with the APC.

Looking to the Future

As we look to the future of advancing the field of Islamic chaplaincy in North America, there are two approaches that can be pursued in parallel with one other. One is a temporary stopgap solution to bridge us to a more sustainable framework in the future. This involves grandfathering in those with some deficiencies in their knowledge and training, who are already providing support within institutions. The second approach involves addressing the overall framework itself: This requires a collaboration between chaplaincy programs and traditional Islamic seminaries in order to create a clear roadmap for students to follow to ensure those who specialize in chaplaincy have a solid foundation in the requisite religious knowledge.

A Temporary Solution to Fill in Gaps

As for the first approach, there is already an example of what grandfathering in those chaplains with some deficiencies in religious knowledge can look like. Organizations such as the Muslim Endorsement Council (MEC) and the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) serve as endorsing bodies for Muslim chaplains. MEC defines ecclesiastical

endorsement as: "a declaration and affirmation of a Chaplain's good standing with the American Muslim community and [it] vouches for the disposition, character and competencies of the man or woman serving in the role of a Muslim Chaplain" (Muslim Endorsement Council, n.d.). Candidates for a MEC endorsement must demonstrate competencies in the following categories: Qurʾānic literacy, Prophetic theory and praxis, cross cultural capability, facilitation skills, and professional theory and practice. Those who apply for a MEC endorsement will be given one of four possible decisions: (1) approval if they meet the full standards; (2) conditional approval if they meet a sufficient amount of standards to function as a chaplain, in which case they must complete specific continuing education requirements until they become fully endorsed; (3) a deferral of endorsement if the board requires further information; or (4) denial, in which case they can reapply for endorsement when they have met the standards (Muslim Endorsement Council, n.d.).

The purpose of endorsement is that endorsing bodies serve as a filter: While some aspiring chaplains may have the natural talents to provide support that is beneficial to care seekers, the reality is that the potential for benefit must be weighed against potential harms. One of those potential harms can come from misguidance based on misunderstandings or misapplications of the Islamic tradition, due to a lack of requisite studies with qualified teachers and programs. In the absence of this filter, anyone can call themselves a Muslim chaplain, even if their beliefs and practices are not in line with those generally accepted by the religious community of Muslims. I recall serving as a chaplain at a hospital and speaking to the director of spiritual care about *taṣawwuf* in the Islamic tradition. She then told me about a local religious group who practiced Sufism but did not identify as Muslim. When I clarified that this group, who considered Sufism as their religion unattached to Islam, would have an interfaith dynamic with local Muslim community members rather than an intrafaith one, my director looked at me with confusion. Secular institutions who hire Muslim chaplains have no way of assessing qualifications in the Islamic tradition, and they are not equipped to do so. This is precisely why the Association of Professional Chaplains requires ecclesiastical endorsement for chaplains, recognizing that there are established religious communities that define their beliefs and practices, and thus what religious leadership and authority entails. The institutions where Muslim chaplains serve, as well as the *people* that Muslim chaplains serve, need to feel confident that the person chosen for the chaplain position has the religious knowledge and ability to accurately represent their faith and faith community.

A second potential harm comes from "wolves in sheep's clothing." In this respect, endorsing bodies serve as institutions of accountability. We have heard too many stories of grave misconduct by religious leaders in positions of authority, such as those documented by In Shaykh's Clothing regarding spiritual abuse.[2] It is important that chaplains are held to high ethical standards and processes of accountability in order to protect care seekers who could be taken advantage of by a charlatan—one who claims to have religious

[2] See "Accounts of Spiritual Abuse," In Shaykh's Clothing, accessed December 30, 2024, https://inshaykhsclothing.com/accounts-of-spiritual-abuse/.

knowledge yet is not connected to any religious teachers or community, or a predator who seeks to use their religious knowledge and connections in order to perpetrate misconduct.

The second element of this stopgap solution is to provide continuing education and support networks to help make up the shortfall in chaplains' training, through organizations like the Association of Muslim Chaplains (AMC). AMC has served as a large tent organization for a variety of Muslim chaplains, including Sunni and Shia, men and women, volunteer chaplains and those who are paid, those serving within institutions as well as private community organizations, and CPE students all the way to seasoned board certified chaplains.[3] Some of these Muslim chaplains are imams and *ʿālim*s, with the requisite Islamic knowledge but seeking to develop and expand their pastoral skills. Others have advanced pastoral care expertise, but are looking to fill in the gaps of their knowledge in Arabic and Islamic studies. I have personally benefited from the programming and professional relationships provided by AMC. These include professional development in the form of an annual conference, monthly webinars, and active cohorts of Muslim chaplains and Muslim CPE students who offer mutual spiritual and emotional support. Perhaps even more importantly, these cohorts serve as an internal consultative body for problem solving for chaplains in the various settings where they serve.[4] A webinar that I personally facilitated as AMC's Chair of Professional Development connected Muslim chaplains with Islamic scholars at Darul Qasim. Shaykh Mohammed Amin Kholwadia gave a presentation on Darul Qasim's ethics consult service, in which an interdisciplinary group of Islamic scholars and physicians provide Islamic bioethics guidance and recommendations to Muslim families engaged in medical decision making. This kind of collaboration between religious scholars and Muslim chaplains is in line with the relationship building described by Gilliat-Ray, Ali, and Pattison:

> Muslim chaplains in the States who have undertaken CPE, but not received 'alim training, are clear that this can impose limits on what they can do. They feel that it is important to know what their boundaries might be: "I have to know what I can do and what I can't do, you know, and I have to make alliances with people who can do the things I can't do… I have to have the people I can go to." (Gilliat-Ray, Ali, and Pattison 2013, 157)

A Longterm Solution for the Education of Muslim Chaplains

An ideal roadmap for the religious education of Muslim chaplains would be for aspiring students to attend an Islamic seminary for their Arabic and Islamic studies to achieve the requisite religious knowledge, connected to Muslim scholars, for the "content and ethos" that Gilliat-Ray and her coauthors describe. The curriculum would include traditional texts in Arabic on *ʿaqīda*, *fiqh*, *tafsīr*, ḥadīth, *tazkiya* or *taṣawwuf*, and other core subjects. The ethos of such a curriculum involves engaging in the *ijāza* system of studying from teachers who have an *isnād* (chain of transmission) back to the Prophet Muhammad, for reliability

[3] Learn more about the Association of Muslim Chaplains at https://www.associationofmuslimchaplains.org/.
[4] For a list of the types of chaplains which AMC serves, see "Membership Categories," Association of Muslim Chaplains, accessed December 30, 2024, https://www.associationofmuslimchaplains.org/categories-benefits.

of the content of study. It also includes a sense of mentorship, so that students do not only learn for information and details, but they strive to apply the knowledge to their own situations and implement it in their daily lives. A key Islamic principle in the dissemination of religious knowledge is that learning how one is to implement the knowledge (*ʿilm*) with wisdom (*ḥikma*) is done through emulating the practice and character of one's teachers. These same teachers serve as lifelong mentors for graduates of these seminaries, giving them a trusted Muslim scholar who they can consult for more complicated matters they come across in their specific contexts. Having a solid foundation in Arabic and Islamic studies, from within the tradition, also better prepares students for graduate level studies in American academic institutions—where critical thinking and critique, as well as underlying modern and postmodern philosophical assumptions, are part of the curriculum, and can challenge the worldview and assumptions of Muslims and the Islamic tradition.

Gilliat-Ray, Ali, and Pattison consider the potential of such a framework and the positive effect it could have on the future of chaplaincy in North America. The authors write, "American Muslim chaplains who combine an 'alim training with an understanding of CPE (of whom there are very few) are actively engaged in developing an Islamic legal framework that aims to bridge the gap between CPE approaches to chaplaincy and traditional Islamic sciences" (Gilliat-Ray, Ali, and Pattison 2013, 158). They use the example of Imam Mohamed Magid, the former president of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and current resident scholar/executive imam of the ADAMS Center in Virginia, who champions the need for producing:

> al-Fiqh al-Waqi (contextual fiqh), or al-Fiqh al-Aam wal Khas (particular fiqh, as opposed to general understanding of fiqh). He notes that it is necessary for any chaplain to understand three important realities, these being: i) the dominant culture, ii) the sub-culture, iii) individual need. He adds that a chaplain must also have a deep understanding of the institutions in which chaplains serve, and appreciate the influence this might have on the psychology of clients. (Gilliat-Ray, Ali, and Pattison 2013, 158)

In my MDiv thesis, I included a quote from Dr. Ingrid Mattson's book *The Story of the Qur'an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life* (Blackwell Publishing, 2008) in which she speaks on the need to balance between established *fiqh* rulings, legal maxims (*qawāʿid al-fiqhiyya*), and the objectives of the law (*maqāṣid al-sharīʿa*). In addition to *al-Fiqh al-Wāqʿī*, there are figures like Dr. Aasim Padela, who is pursuing a *maqāṣid al-sharīʿa* framework through the Initiative on Islam and Medicine. Through this initiative, scholars, researchers, and students are able to consult and pursue research, books, and course offerings in the field of Islamic bioethics.[5]

[5] See, for example, the course "An Introduction to the Field of Islamic Bioethics," Initiative on Islam and Medicine, accessed December 30, 2024, https://medicineandislam.org/bioethics-course-2024/.

The Need for Bridging CPE and Islamic Teachings: A Case Study

In the same vein as developing *al-Fiqh al-Wāqʿī* and applying *qawāʾid al-fiqhiyya* as it relates to chaplaincy, in my 2016 MDiv thesis, I wrote: "As a student Muslim chaplain, this is an area I am continuing to learn and understand from my practice in the hospital, such as providing 'pastoral touch' to women" (Elias 2016). The application of contextual *fiqh* and Islamic legal maxims in the field of chaplaincy can be demonstrated through this issue of providing "pastoral touch" to care seekers of the opposite gender. In his journal article in *Chaplaincy Today* entitled "The Intention of Touch in Pastoral Care," Zach Thomas calls "healing touch" what my first CPE educator called "pastoral touch": "To reclaim healing touch as a part of pastoral care we need to understand the basic dynamics of heart/hand coordination" (Thomas 1999, 23). In the same way my CPE educator called chaplaincy both an art and a science, Thomas outlines the contextual factors that guide the proper application of healing touch, writing, "These dynamics reside in a combination of the caregiver's intention, the mutual expectations of those involved in the pastoral interaction, and the choices of setting in which healing touch occurs" (Thomas 1999, 23). Intentional "pastoral touch" can play a key role in an encounter between a care seeker and a chaplain, aiding in the care seeker's healing. However, this can pose a challenge for Muslim chaplains when providing pastoral care to care seekers of the opposite gender. In order to navigate such an issue with confidence, Muslim chaplains must be familiar with the relevant teachings and debate within the Islamic tradition.

Related to the topic of touching the opposite gender, Dr. Hatem al-Haj, a member of the Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America (AMJA), recently provided a helpful explanation of the kind of *Fiqh al-ʿĀm wal Khāṣ* that Imam Magid calls for, as well as the application of the *qawāʾid al-fiqhiyya* that Dr. Ingrid Mattson references. In his social media post about a recent incident between the new leader of Syria and a German diplomat, in which the Syrian leader did not shake the diplomat's hand, Dr. Al-Haj prefaces his point by stating the position of the four *madhāhib* (legal schools of Sunni Islam) and the majority of scholars: that it is generally prohibited for men to shake hands with women. He then writes:

> I would not have faulted him if he had shaken hands with her. Here are my reasons: … it is recognized that if it is indeed prohibited, the nature of the prohibition falls under tahrim al-wasa'il—a prohibition aimed not at something inherently evil but at blocking the means to something inherently evil. This opens the door for the principle of hajah (need) to apply, allowing for exceptions in certain circumstances. We have numerous legal maxims that support this position, including: What is prohibited to block the means to evil may be permitted for a greater benefit. Another maxim states: What is prohibited as a means (tahrim al-wasa'il) becomes permissible for a need or an overriding benefit (maslahah rajihah). Imam Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyyah has written extensively on the conflict between acts that carry both good and evil or that conflict with each other. His insights should be consulted by anyone in a position of authority. [Majmu' al-Fatawa, Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyyah, 20:48] There is a tendency to overcompensate after tense situations of this nature. Personally, I would rather see him shake hands (without lust) with one

> hundred female dignitaries and remain confident and steadfast in his negotiations than feel compelled to overcompensate later. That said, I commend him for his principled position. It may also hold political significance to avoid appearing overly compromising. (Al-Haj 2025)

Although a social media post about political events, Dr. Hatem al-Haj gives a beneficial commentary and helpful summary of the *qawāʾid al-fiqhiyya* on this topic, while applying it to a real-life interaction between a Muslim male and non-Muslim female. He also considers the religious and cultural values of each, as well as the larger context and nature of the circumstances, weighing the benefits and harms within that context.

In a similar fashion related to my work as a hospital chaplain, I have been placed in situations where the benefits of physical touch which Shaykh Mikaeel describes in his book, *With the Heart in Mind*, have come into conflict with the general Islamic prohibition against cross-gender physical touch. As a Muslim chaplain navigating largely non-Muslim institutions, there have been times when I believe exceptions have applied, within two tiers of practice. Please note that the interactions described below involved non-Muslim care seekers, since in my experience, cross-gender interactions among Muslims often carry an unspoken awareness of non-touch between men and women.

In the first tier of practice, when I worked at a Level I trauma center, there were many times when the chaplain accompanied the medical team and security to provide an official death notification to legal next of kin. At times, this resulted in one or more family members falling to the ground in extreme grief, and it required me to safely help them get up and into a chair—an action that involved touching. At other times, a family member would need help going to view their deceased loved one either in the patient room or in a separate viewing area, and if they were unsteady on their feet or appeared to be falling, I would help support them and safely get them seated.

On the second tier, there were times when a family member, in their grief or upon getting ready to leave the hospital, would hug me. It did not seem like the proper moment to push them away from me and explain to them Islamic values and practices. Instead, I understood that this came from the practice of the dominant culture, as a gesture of gratitude and an expression of the need they had for pastoral comfort in that moment. Also on the second tier are exceptional situations of patients, such as a homeless person or someone facing severe depression, who requested a chaplain. In these moments, these patients often shared that they were facing extreme isolation, either through their circumstances or through withdrawal. When they shared their stories with me and reached for my hand—either in prayer or during particularly emotional moments as they described their experiences—as a chaplain, I viewed these as moments of "pastoral touch" that were not initiated by the chaplain, but as a need being expressed by the care seeker. These situations, once again, appeared to be "one-off" moments, where an explanation of why I could not touch them based on my faith and practice could have the detrimental effect of further reinforcing their isolation and tendencies to withdraw.

There have also been times as a chaplain when I did hold firm to boundaries. In one instance during my first CPE internship also at a Level I trauma center, a female patient was in such pain that she could not talk. Finally, after a handful of visits, the patient's pain

was controlled sufficiently so that she was able to engage in conversation, and she asked to hold my hands in prayer. When I allowed her to do so, she stroked my hand and appeared to have a look of desire on her face, which was shocking to me and made me very uncomfortable. In the next visit when she again asked to hold my hands in prayer, I declined, even though I could see the disapproval in her eyes and body language. However, it was important in that situation to invoke the principle of *taḥrīm al-wasāʾil* in order to block the means to any potential evil, as Dr. Hatem al-Haj noted above. In addition, if a female colleague hugs me or shakes my hand and I believe that this could become a regular gesture with that individual, I will often take her to the side (so as not to embarrass her) and explain my Islamic beliefs and practice of not touching the opposite gender out of respect. In the majority of these situations, my female colleagues have expressed appreciation for not embarrassing them in the workplace by rejecting their first handshake or hug, and at the same time they were willing to respect my beliefs by not shaking hands or hugging in the future.

It is important for Muslim chaplains to consider the reasons and necessities for "pastoral touch," constantly evaluating and weighing the harms and benefits, since the general Islamic prohibition exists for a reason. The stories of religious clergy slipping into inappropriate relationships with the opposite gender, even consensual relationships, are tales of caution and reminders of how power dynamics, trauma bonding, and relationship rapport can cause lines to become blurred—leading caregivers and care seekers down a road of unprofessional and inappropriate behavior. This is why workplace laws on sexual harassment and policies that govern the interactions and any potential romantic relationships between managers and subordinate employees exist. This is also a blessing in disguise for such a general prohibition existing in the Islamic tradition, since norms based on the dominant culture can change. This can be seen in the common practice of men and women shaking hands, hugging, and even kissing on the cheek with the opposite gender. The #MeToo movement has revealed how this level of comfort with the opposite gender has contributed to widescale misconduct.[6] Now, the current climate and narrative in the dominant culture has changed, and involves consent to touch and cautions against such forward practices, even if the intention is from a place of care.

Conclusion

While the thoughts penned in my 2016 MDiv thesis were formulated after only one unit of CPE, my reflections today are informed by a one-year CPE residency and over seven years as a staff chaplain in hospitals across three states. I hope it is clear from this reflection piece that the field of chaplaincy has been expanding and deepening over the past decade, and it is not without its successes and shortcomings—though, overall, I believe the developments have been more positive than negative. The overall framework and roadmap to Islamic chaplaincy for Muslims has room for improvement, and the individual dilemmas that

[6] For more on the #MeToo movement, see "History & Inception," MeToo, accessed January 6, 2025, https://metoomvmt.org/get-to-know-us/history-inception/.

Muslim chaplains face are controversial and challenging at times. However, as I wrote in the introduction of my thesis:

> In many ways, what is happening today in the American context, what Muslims are facing and what Muslim chaplains are expected to do in their work in terms of interfaith support, is something not seen in the books of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), which actually is not unlike what Muslims faced in past contextualization of Islam to new times and places. The goal of US Muslims living in the 21st century is to understand how the [sacred Islamic] texts will interact with our new environment. The relatively new and specific role of professional Muslim chaplains will play a role in that new formulation of authority and leadership. (Elias 2016)

We see these successes in the refinement of standards and accountability from endorsing bodies, such as MEC and ISNA. We also see AMC providing continuing education and professional development programming in order to fill the gaps in education and training, as well as to bring Muslim chaplains together for companionship, mentorship, and problem solving. Each year, with more and more Muslim chaplains achieving board certification with the Association of Professional Chaplains, we see a critical mass growing that may yet lead to the formation of the Muslim community's own professional board certification body, similar to the National Association of Catholic Chaplains (NACC) and Neshama: Association of Jewish Chaplains (NAJC).

Finally, through the alignment of Islamic seminaries, Islamic chaplaincy higher education programs, Muslim ecclesiastical endorsement bodies, and Muslim chaplaincy organizations, we can create clearer paths for those who have the spiritual motivation and talent to learn and receive training to serve the Muslim community as chaplains. These partnerships can help ensure that the wider Muslim community, public institutions, and professional chaplaincy organizations understand the standards of education and accountability for Muslim chaplains serving Muslim and non-Muslim care seekers. In addition, valuable contributions of Islamic scholars (*ʿulamāʾ*), like Shaykh Mikaeel Ahmed Smith and others—rooted soundly in the Islamic tradition and engaging with the social sciences—show us a blueprint for integrating spiritual and pastoral care with both sound religious knowledge and the academic sciences. This can lead to improved curriculums and reference materials for professional Muslim chaplaincy going forward in North America.

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