

Beyond Pastoral Care: Justice-Oriented Islamic Chaplaincy

Ibrahim J. Long*

In recent years, Muslim chaplains across North America have increasingly found themselves at the intersection of religious service, social justice, and internal institutional tensions. Serving in diverse institutions, such as prisons, hospitals, and universities, Muslim chaplains must courageously navigate complex institutional and community politics while supporting individuals who may be experiencing racism, discrimination, and Islamophobia. In doing so, they are called to provide spiritual care and social justice advocacy for the inmates, patients, and students they support. However, this advocacy often comes with significant challenges, among them personal attacks, online harassment, and “doxing” from groups who attack them based on their faith, ethnicity, and humanitarian stances, as seen in the case of university Muslim chaplains who have openly voiced the needs and concerns of Palestinian students (see Ahmad 2025; CBC News 2024; Kim 2024; Muslim Chaplaincy Toronto 2024).

These attacks and other challenges highlight the increasingly volatile and polarized landscape in which Muslim chaplains are called to serve. To enable them to confront these challenges effectively, Islamic chaplaincy programs must look beyond traditional pastoral care and interfaith models of chaplaincy and integrate social work skills into their curriculum. With this broader approach, Muslim chaplains will be better prepared to navigate the complex issues of racism, Islamophobia, and marginalization as they seek to provide spiritual care within our contemporary political and institutional landscapes.

Social Justice and Spiritual Care

In today’s politically charged environment, spiritual care professionals and those they serve may face harassment due to their faith, personal views, race, ethnicity, or community activism. This hostile landscape makes spiritual care and support for marginalized individuals within US and Canadian institutions threatening and complex. Graduate chaplaincy programs that focus solely on pastoral care and interfaith dialogue—without addressing social justice issues like systemic discrimination and racism or equipping students with skills in strategic advocacy—risk leaving Muslim chaplains unprepared for the complex political and institutional challenges they face today.

* Ibrahim J. Long (MSW, MA, Graduate Certificate in Islamic Chaplaincy) manages youth wellness initiatives at IslamicFamily, serves as a Muslim chaplain at the University of Alberta, and teaches in the Social Work and Child and Youth Care programs at NorQuest College. His work appears in leading journals and edited volumes, including *Mantle of Mercy: Islamic Chaplaincy in North America* (Templeton Press, 2022).

Case Example: Zayn¹

Zayn, a Muslim chaplain at a large university, had built a long and respected career. He was deeply committed to supporting students' spiritual and emotional well-being, providing pastoral care to those in need, and fostering interfaith dialogue across the campus. His work was widely praised as he earned the trust and respect of students and faculty from diverse backgrounds. Zayn's advocacy for Palestinian students, driven by a commitment to student wellness, justice, and inclusion on campus, was a natural extension of his dedication to supporting marginalized voices.

Throughout his career, Zayn passionately engaged in interfaith dialogues, helping bridge divides and supporting understanding among students and faculty of different faiths. However, when tensions between Palestinian students and the university administration escalated during the genocide in Gaza, Zayn found himself facing a situation that his training had not prepared him for. His public support for Palestinian students' right to express their views and experiences was met with accusations of anti-Semitism. Despite his long history of fostering peace and understanding, the accusations intensified, with some students and faculty questioning his character and beliefs. The situation worsened when Zayn began receiving death threats, both online and in person, leaving him feeling vulnerable and isolated. As the situation grew more polarized, Zayn found himself overwhelmed by the institutional politics at play. University staff were divided—some privately expressed support for him, understanding the nature of his work, while others, influenced by the accusations and growing public pressure, called for his removal. The campus atmosphere became increasingly hostile, with rumors swirling and dividing the community.

Despite his training in interfaith dialogue, Zayn struggled to navigate the systemic discrimination he and the Palestinian students he supported encountered both on and off campus. He had never been taught how to facilitate conversations on contentious political issues or address the deeply rooted biases that influenced his campus environment. His role, once fulfilling, now felt like an insurmountable challenge. Zayn did not know how to advocate for policy changes to address the growing polarization or how to support community development in an environment so fractured by political tension. Ultimately, the pressure became too much, and the university administration made the decision to dismiss Zayn, citing accusations of anti-Semitism and the escalating tensions on campus. The dismissal was a crushing blow for Zayn, who had dedicated years to supporting students and fostering an inclusive environment. Feeling betrayed by the institution and disillusioned by the complex dynamics he could not navigate, Zayn was left questioning his place within his community and his career as a chaplain.

Growth and Expansion

Muslim chaplaincy has existed long before the establishment of the first accredited graduate Islamic chaplaincy program in the early 2000s. However, the creation of a

¹ Zayn's story is a composite case example based on the real experience of several anonymized Muslim chaplains.

graduate program was a crucial step in advancing the profession. This first program and several that followed drew heavily from the curriculum, resources, and approaches used in Christian chaplaincy programs. While this approach enabled these programs and their graduates to quickly find a place among their Christian peers, it is time to evolve and expand the curriculum. Learning from Christian, Jewish, and Buddhist approaches to spiritual care has provided, and continues to provide, unique perspectives for Muslim chaplains to reflect upon their practice. However, Islamic chaplaincy programs need to reflect the unique and evolving needs of Muslims within US and Canadian institutions. To merely adopt or adapt Christian approaches risks overlooking the specific contemporary and historical challenges Muslim chaplains face, for, unlike their White Protestant Christian peers who are privileged by their race and faith, Muslim chaplains—particularly those of color—work in cultural and institutional environments where they and those they serve must confront systemic racism, Islamophobia, and institutional discrimination.

To address these issues, Islamic chaplaincy programs must expand to include a deeper understanding of systemic discrimination and the history of advocacy movements in North America, subjects more often taught in social work programs. Islamic chaplaincy programs should look to the history of Black Muslim advocacy in the prison system and beyond for inspiration. As we prepare chaplains for today and the future, chaplaincy programs must expand their curricula to include relevant social work frameworks—such as anti-oppressive practice, decolonial approaches, and community development—alongside the legacy of Black Muslim advocacy. This will better equip aspiring Muslim chaplains to navigate today's political challenges and address the spiritual and social justice needs of those they serve.

Roots in Resistance

The history of Muslim chaplaincy work in the United States is deeply intertwined with resisting discrimination and advocating for religious rights and social justice. From its earliest days, Muslim chaplains have understood their role as not just spiritual caregivers, but also as advocates for justice, particularly in the face of institutional racism and Islamophobia. This advocacy has been crucial in shaping their professional identity as individuals providing spiritual care and as leaders committed to addressing the injustices that fellow members of their faith, racial, and cultural community experience within US and Canadian institutions. Muslim chaplains like Zayn are not alone but part of a heritage of advocacy, spiritual support, and resistance.

In the mid-20th century, Black American Muslims actively confronted racial and religious inequalities (see Colley 2014; Smith 1993). Driven by a commitment to racial justice and fair treatment for Muslim inmates, these early pioneers began visiting state and federal prisons to provide spiritual support, education, and advocacy (Kowalski and Becker 2015). The Black American Muslim community, especially members of the Nation of Islam—a socio-religious movement that promotes Black empowerment through a non-orthodox interpretation of Islam—played a crucial role in advocating for Muslim prisoners' religious rights (Jacobs 1980). This advocacy reflected a distinctive approach to pastoral care, for it was grounded in a broader social justice framework that challenged systemic

oppression and focused on securing legal protections for Muslim and other minority faith inmates.

These early leaders' efforts were instrumental in securing vital legal victories, most notably the landmark *Cooper v. Pate* (1964) case, in which the U.S Supreme Court ruled that the First Amendment's religious freedom protections extended to prisoners. This victory resulted from sustained legal battles led by Muslim leaders, chaplains, and their allies, who skillfully navigated the intersection of faith and law to challenge unjust systems. Their efforts helped secure religious accommodations and broader protections for Muslim inmates, including access to religious texts, dietary accommodations, and the ability to observe religious practices—while also securing similar rights to inmates of other faiths.

Revising the Curriculum

Graduate chaplaincy programs must place greater emphasis on the advocacy of early Muslim chaplaincy leaders, examining their skills and drawing inspiration from their efforts. To ensure the field evolves in a way that honors its roots and meets contemporary challenges, programs should collaborate with long-serving Black Muslim chaplains and experienced prison chaplains. As Muslim chaplaincy professionalizes, educators must move beyond Christian models of pastoral care, which have focused on hospital settings, and reconnect with the field's origins in prisons. Like hospital chaplaincy, prison chaplaincy provides chaplaincy students and professionals with many transferable skills. However, prison chaplaincy is unique as the foundational setting for Muslim chaplaincy. It has pushed chaplains to learn how to advocate for religious rights, navigate institutional barriers, and confront systemic challenges.

Muslim prison chaplains have developed critical competencies for decades, including legal advocacy, institutional policy expertise, and community partnership-building. Though at times hindered by systemic challenges—such as those documented by Abdulkadir and Long (2021)—their work has been essential in securing religious accommodations and safeguarding the dignity of incarcerated Muslims. Integrating these skills into chaplaincy training would enhance chaplains' ability to serve effectively across institutional settings. While interfaith dialogue has been a key focus of Muslim chaplaincy programs, it does not fully prepare chaplains to address racism, Islamophobia, and systemic discrimination—issues that arise from both religious and secular actors. To be truly effective, chaplains must also develop advocacy, institutional reform, and social justice skills.

Honoring Our Roots

Islamic teachings emphasize standing against injustice, a value that must be embedded in chaplaincy education. Training should integrate principles from social work, equipping chaplains with the skills to navigate legal frameworks and systemic inequalities. By bridging Islamic ethics with social work methodologies, chaplains can engage in meaningful advocacy while remaining rooted in their faith. Graduate programs must expand their curricula to include legal advocacy, policy navigation, and the history of

Muslim rights activism in the US (both within the prison system and outside of it). This knowledge will empower chaplains to confidently and effectively provide spiritual care, confront systemic injustices, and support their communities in impactful ways. Chaplains may still face false accusations and wrongful terminations, but their training should prepare them for navigating these potential occurrences. By strengthening their advocacy and institutional dynamics training, chaplaincy programs can help ensure that Muslim chaplains continue to serve with compassion, courage, and wisdom.

The history of Muslim chaplaincy in North America serves as a testament to the resilience and dedication of American Muslims, who have tirelessly fought for their religious rights and established a compassionate and supportive presence across diverse institutions. From the early advocacy of Black American Muslims for their rights in prisons to the growing roles of Muslim chaplains in healthcare, universities, and other sectors, the contributions of Muslim chaplains have been transformative. However, as the field continues to evolve, it is crucial that we reflect on our history and consider the skills necessary to advocate and care for those we serve in the present day.

Islamic chaplaincy programs must take seriously the lessons embedded in this history. These programs risk overlooking a central aspect of the American Muslim chaplaincy legacy by failing to incorporate key elements such as institutional navigation, ethical advocacy, and religious accommodations law in various settings (e.g., prisons vs schools) into their curricula. Understanding the intersection of Islamic values and social justice—particularly through the lens of Black Muslim advocacy and frameworks such as anti-racism, decolonization, and institutional reform—is essential for chaplains to fulfill their professional and religious responsibilities. The legacy of early Black Muslim chaplains, who combined faith with activism, offers a powerful model for the future of chaplaincy, one that is both spiritually grounded and socially engaged.

Preparing Chaplains for a Complex and Changing Landscape

As we move forward, Islamic chaplaincy programs must evolve. Institutional navigation, ethical advocacy, and religious accommodations law should be considered indispensable tools for chaplains working in complex, often restrictive environments. Case studies of chaplains securing prayer spaces, defending religious attire, and addressing Islamophobia can offer valuable lessons in practical advocacy. Examples of Muslims (including non-chaplains) dealing with the blowback of advocating for justice and reflections on how this may relate to or be dealt with in a chaplaincy context could be an invaluable resource for Muslim chaplains. Incorporating coursework on Islamic ethics and social justice will help ground chaplaincy in Prophetic principles of justice, wisdom in diplomacy, and speaking truth to power, ensuring that advocacy is spiritually and strategically informed.

Programs must also draw upon the history of Muslim chaplaincy in prisons, where chaplains have long fought for religious accommodations in the face of systemic challenges. To better prepare students, graduate programs should expand Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) and fieldwork placements by partnering with prison chaplains. Exposure to institutional challenges and advocacy work in prison settings equips chaplains with

essential skills for serving effectively in hospitals, universities, and other institutions facing similar obstacles.

Interdisciplinary collaborations will further strengthen advocacy training. Law schools, policy centers, and human rights organizations can offer workshops on legal literacy, helping chaplains understand the complex legal policies surrounding religious accommodations. Partnerships with ethics departments, social work programs, and theology faculties can provide a deeper understanding of how faith and justice intersect within institutional systems. Furthermore, joint initiatives with advocacy organizations will give chaplains hands-on experience in policy negotiations, community mobilization, and conflict resolution—essential skills for effective and compassionate advocacy. By integrating these essential components into their curricula, Islamic chaplaincy programs can equip graduates with spiritual depth and the practical skills needed to navigate institutional challenges, uphold justice, and advocate for equity—now and in the future.

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