The Development of Islamic Chaplaincy in the United States: An Interview with Dr. Jimmy Jones

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Introduction

The field of Islamic chaplaincy in the United States has evolved significantly over the last few decades, growing from a largely informal and unrecognized service to a respected and essential profession in which Muslim chaplains have become active in hospitals, military services, prisons, and other institutions. From its early days in the 1970s until the present, individuals like Dr. James "Jimmy" Jones have played a central role in shaping this field. In this article, we delve into his experiences and insights on its development, the role of American Muslim seminaries, and the challenges faced by chaplains.

Dr. Jones became involved in Islamic chaplaincy during the 1970s as a volunteer chaplain and is now executive vice president of The Islamic Seminary of America (TISA). Through his work and reflections, he has watched Islamic chaplaincy programs evolve and receive growing recognition within the broader American society. This interview highlights his personal journey, the obstacles faced in professionalizing chaplaincy, the future of training Muslim chaplains, and his perspective on the importance of establishing Muslim-led institutions for leadership training.

The Role and History of American Muslim Seminaries

Within our conversation, Dr. Jones explained that Muslim chaplaincy was influenced by early pioneers such as the Nation of Islam and shaped by the growth of American Muslim seminaries, which began to emerge in the late 20th century. These seminaries played a critical role in developing a systematic approach to Islamic thought and practice for American Muslims. Dr. Jones emphasizes that while chaplaincy itself was not always viewed as a distinct profession, this attitude has changed as the Islamic community's growing need for trained leaders became increasingly apparent.

Chaplaincy Programs

As the demand for Muslim chaplains grew, the focus turned to providing effective leadership training. Dr. Jones points out a critical gap: "I was puzzled why, at one point, Christian institutions like Hartford Seminary were the primary trainers of Muslim chaplains. This seemed odd to me." In 2010, Hartford Seminary, a Christian institution,

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began offering a Muslim chaplaincy program, which Dr. Jones saw as both an opportunity and a challenge. While he acknowledged that Hartford's initiative helped fill the educational gap for Muslims within this field, he also noted: "We need to train our own leaders, not rely on institutions that are rooted in other faith traditions." This realization drove him and others to concentrate on designing robust training programs within the Muslim community created by Muslims for Muslims.

The Islamic Seminary of America

The need for Muslim-led chaplaincy training programs has led to the establishment of institutions like The Islamic Seminary of America (TISA), which aims to provide culturally relevant education for future Muslim leaders. However, this journey initially faced resistance. Dr. Jones recalls: "When we opened The Islamic Seminary of America, people were saying, 'You shouldn't study at an Islamic seminary in America [for chaplaincy]. You should go to a non-Muslim institution.'" At TISA, Dr. Jones has worked to develop a curriculum that combines Islamic theology with practical skills in counseling, ethics, and leadership. Despite the significant progress made in training, several challenges remain, among them—rather surprisingly—a lack of support from the community.

Interview with Dr. Jones

Conducted by Dr. Mona Islam on January 16, 2025

Dr. Islam:
I would like to start by asking if you can provide a brief introduction about yourself, a little bit of background for those who are not familiar with you.

Dr. Jones:
I got into chaplaincy in an odd way. My graduate schools were Christian seminaries: I went to Yale Divinity School for a Master of Arts in Religion and to what was then Hartford Seminary for a Doctor of Ministry. So, I was running into chaplains in that context. The whole notion of chaplains in communal spaces was only beginning to emerge outside of prisons. I would add that concurrently, the Nation of Islam had been spearheading efforts in prisons, particularly with African American Muslims. In a sense, they were the community's pioneer chaplains, even though their beliefs are very different from those of orthodox Sunni Islam. The reality is that a lot of our current ability to work in the prison system is really based on the work that they did early on.

So, it's two points that led me to chaplaincy. One: I heard about chaplaincy. Of course, I heard about chaplains growing up, but they were Christian and sometimes Jewish chaplains. And then two: The Nation of Islam—which became the World Community of Islam in the West, and then the Community of Warith Deen Mohammed—were pioneers in this respect. I became Muslim, *al-ḥamdu lillāh*, in 1979. At that time, the Nation of Islam had transitioned, under Warith Deen Mohammed's leadership, to a more Sunni version of Islam. One of my first jobs as a new convert was to go into the New Haven Correctional Facility as a chaplain. The only word they had for it in the facility at that time was "volunteer chaplain," so that's how I got the title. Even though I knew very little about

Islam, it made me study harder because incarcerated people often do a lot of studying during their time.

I've been wearing this title for over 40 years. I worked at the New Haven Correctional Facility from 1979 until just before COVID broke out in 2019, *al-ḥamdu lillāh*. So that's my background.

I would add that now I do community chaplaincy, primarily attached to Masjid al-Islam in New Haven. I focus on premarital and family pastoral advice (which is not clinical counseling but more pastoral advising) and when people die, helping connect the bereaved with the necessary people for advice. I do this semi-regularly, and also advise leadership on what Christians would call "pastoral issues." So, chaplaincy through serendipity became a big part of my life, *mā shā Allāh*.

Dr. Islam:
Jazāk Allāhu khayr. I was going to ask you, how did you become interested in chaplaincy? I feel like you covered some of that. Is there anything you want to add?

Dr. Jones:
Yes, I became interested in chaplaincy through the community of Warith Deen Mohammed. I did that for a long time. But honestly, I didn't think of it as a "profession," you know? You just go and do it. I started thinking of it as a profession only around 2010 or 2011, when my alma mater, Hartford Seminary, started doing a Muslim chaplaincy program. That was something I had never really thought of before. However, I thought it was odd that a Christian seminary would be training Muslim chaplains. It just sounded odd to me. I thought about it like if you and I decided to start a training program for Jewish chaplains—the outcry you would get from the Jewish community would be huge.

It's just strange to me that a Christian institution was producing most of our chaplains. That's why I got more invested. This isn't a criticism of Hartford Seminary, but a criticism of the Muslim community. We should want to train our own leadership rather than have it primarily trained by other faith traditions.

When we opened The Islamic Seminary of America, people were saying, "Oh, you shouldn't study at an Islamic seminary in America. You should go to a non-Muslim institution." People were literally saying this publicly, including academics. So, my interest peaked when I realized that we, as a community, weren't very interested in training our own leaders. That's why I got involved with a group of people to revive the Association of Muslim Chaplains. *Al-ḥamdu lillāh*, we did that, and it's much stronger as an institution now.

Additionally, we started running training programs for chaplains and imams every year from 2010 to 2019, until COVID hit. The goal was to think about two things: What kind of standards should there be for chaplaincy and imam training, and what kind of institutions should we develop?

So, my professional interest in chaplaincy really grew when my alma mater started the first accredited Muslim chaplain training programs. But I still thought it was odd that we didn't have our own institutions for this.

Dr. Islam:
I'm curious—did you ever have a chance to find out what they were teaching in their program?

Dr. Jones:
Oh yeah, I did. Many Christian seminaries and other institutions train people from other faith traditions. The difference is that the latter have the choice of either going to a non-home-based institution or one led by people of their own faith [for their CPE training]. But when someone outside the faith tradition teaches people of another tradition, the approach is different. For instance, if we taught Jews, our interest in doing so would be very different. The key difference is that we, as an institution, are very concerned with maintaining Islam in America. I don't think that's the primary goal of Hartford Seminary or Union Theological Seminary. They also have an inter-religious program with a focus on Islam, but it's just a different ethos.

It's a very different thing when the institution is Muslim, with Muslim faculty and policies made by Muslims, as that impacts what people learn. Institutions like Zaytuna, The Islamic Seminary of America, and American Islamic College function differently from Christian-based institutions. I'm not criticizing those Christian institutions. I'm just saying that their approach is different. This is just a statement of fact.

And the fact is that the program within a non-Muslim institution feels different and functions differently in general than in a freestanding Muslim institution. And there are other examples. Bayan, for instance, is inside the Chicago Theological Seminary. I imagine it would function very differently if its graduate school were not a part of the Chicago Theological Seminary. Again, this is not a criticism, but a statement of fact. Earlier in life, I was an organizational consultant, and so I think in organizational terms and about organizational culture. One way of illustrating the difference among Hartford and Bayan and Zaytuna is that the institution's core is developed and run by Muslims, and this makes all the difference in the world in terms of what one learns. Not a criticism. I have to say this a thousand times simply because people see it as such. I'm by-and-large criticizing the Muslims because, unfortunately, the Muslim community in North America has not felt the urgency that I think we should about training our own leaders, both imams and chaplains. A young Jewish or Christian person can go from kindergarten to a PhD in their own faith institutions. I see my statement as a plea to the community to take the notion of training our leadership for the next generation much more seriously than we do now, because what happens is that often we're building and developing some excellent K through 12 schools, and then youngsters go off to a [non-Muslim] four-year institution.

I spent 30 years teaching at an undergraduate institution. I want to tell you that a lot of the work can be easily undone by one freshman semester at a non-Muslim institution because of the value system. And we see this in the current political world, as the so-called "woke culture" is a real thing on college campuses. And much of its values don't coincide with those of Islam.

My point here is that as Muslims, we need to understand that if we're serious about rooting ourselves in this place and in this time, we ought to be about the business of making sure that we have substantial higher education institutions. I offer Texas Christian

University as an example. This university is part of the Higher Learning Commission, which is part of something called, I believe, the Churches of Christ, which has thousands of students. I've forgotten the exact number. In seventeen institutions, they have seven seminaries, right? And they're about 10% of the Muslim population, about 350,000 people. We have nothing near what they have. As a community, they understand the importance of training their own leadership, particularly in chaplaincy, I think because chaplains usually function in interfaith spaces. And so, aside from the service they're giving, Muslim chaplains are often representing Islam to the wider world. I think it's important for us to train our own.

Let me finish this little piece by saying this: I am not saying that all chaplains should be trained by Muslim institutions, but that our community should primarily train ourselves. I have no problem with people who want to go someplace else and get a degree; however, it's not something I would do. I didn't really have a choice when I was going to graduate school. But those who choose to do this should understand that it is extremely important for those institutions who are training our leadership to have a model of what we think our leadership ought to be. They need institutions like the American Islamic College, TISA, and Zaytuna, that are producing knowledge that helps the broader world and produces leaders who understand what we think a Muslim leader or chaplain should be.

Dr. Islam:
Yeah, I agree, especially about the point where you said it's not a criticism. I think Muslims get really sensitive when they hear anything that's even a little bit critical or they think is a criticism, but it's not. We have to be critical thinkers and understand all that.

So, I want to ask you: What do you feel is the connection between TISA and chaplaincy? If you can offer your thoughts about that?

Dr. Jones:
When we saw that Hartford Seminary was the primary trainer of Muslim chaplains, we said, "Wow, we can't let this be." Again, I keep saying it's not a criticism of Hartford Seminary, but a criticism of us. We ought to be wanting to provide the leadership for training our own chaplains.

Thus, we started the Annual Shura at Yale University. In this Annual Shura, we focused on three things: (1) developing professional Islamic chaplaincy primarily through reviving the Association of Muslim Chaplains; (2) setting standards, which will also impact standards for imams—this eventually became the Muslim Endorsement Council; first, it was the Muslim Endorsement Council of Connecticut, and then the national Muslim Endorsement Council—and (3) establishing our own seminary.

Not for not one moment from roughly 2010 to 2017 did I ever think that I would be running TISA, because I thought that such a person should have a stronger background in the religious and Islamic sciences than I do. I'm not saying that they should be a deep, deep scholar, but I mean, I'm still a bit of a convert in my view. I've been a Muslim for a long time, but I haven't put in the time like Zaid Shakir, Abdul Hakim Jackson, or even Ubaydullah Evans have. These converts have put in the time, deep diving into the faith far more than I have.

One day I just woke up and found myself in charge as the executive vice president. But the point is that it's part of those three things that I thought and we thought we should do: (1) professionalize our leadership, chaplaincy, and imams; (2) set standards for our chaplains and imams; and (3) have our own seminary, our own training institute. And so that's how I got from chaplaincy into TISA.

Dr. Islam:
What issues do you deal with as a chaplain?

Dr. Jones:
First of all, the very notion of chaplaincy—even though the concept comes from Christianity and we don't have it expressed in that same way—to be a servant leader is extremely important in this land. The notion of what they call pastoral counseling, advising people (*naṣīḥa*) is crucial.

And so, in a sense, what people are calling chaplaincy, to me, largely comes right out of our beloved Prophet's (peace be upon him) Sunna. One is to give. Much of what I do is to try to give goodness. Much of what our beloved Prophet did was give good advice. So many of my interactions with people are very brief, like walking into and leaving the masjid, after *jumuʿa* a brief phone call, and sometimes they ask me questions. For instance, one day I got a call from a mentee asking me about organ donation. I replied: "I'm not qualified to talk about this. I'm neither a medical professional nor have deep enough knowledge in Islam. And I'm not a *muftī*." So I called somebody who was.

What I often do, in my capacity as a chaplain, is connect people to other people. In this case, I connected him with Dr. Aasim Padela, a medical doctor—our keynote speaker at our TISA graduation ceremony on May 17—who is almost single-handedly establishing Islamic bioethics based on deep, deep roots in our tradition. But obviously, he's a medical doctor with roots in the medical profession. However, Dr. Rania Awad teaches us that we would not have medicine, particularly holistic medicine, today were it not for the efforts of Muslims when we were the world's intellectual leaders**.**

Dr. Islam:
Thank you so much, Dr. Jones, for sharing your background, insights, and wisdom that you bring to the table. I know chaplaincy is still a newly forming field in a way, especially in our community. So, we definitely need people to share their insights. I also think you have that unique perspective of being able to look at other communities and compare what's needed and what's deficient. I thought your explanation of different institutions trying to train Muslim chaplains was both interesting and really unique. I think that should be shared more. Is there anything else you'd like to share with us today?

Dr. Jones:
The main thing I'd like to share is that we Muslims need to get serious about training our own leadership. I often tell parents, "Don't depend on the MSA to save your children." We need more robust institutions that will help us with our young people in particular.

Dr. Islam:
Thank you so much.

Reflections

Chaplaincy is deeply rooted in the Islamic faith and practice and within the Sunna of the Prophet, peace be upon him. Dr. Nazila Isgandarova, in her book *Islamic Spiritual and Religious Care: Theory and Practices* (Pandora Press, 2018), and Dr. Jones, in his interview, both relay the same idea: Islamic chaplaincy is not limited to the mosque, but is in actively engaging with people in distress in various locations and situations—in hospitals, at funerals, in schools, and in family matters. Practicing chaplaincy is often implemented by offering spiritual guidance while addressing real-world issues like mental health, family conflicts, or personal crises. Drawing from their advice, I believe that if Muslim chaplains wish to be effective, they should follow the Prophet's example to become compassionate, patient, and trustworthy leaders during emotional and spiritual crises.

Dr. Jones explains that part of his practice often involves giving advice, thereby revealing that a chaplain's role isn't just about formal counseling, but about guiding care seekers to Islam's teachings. This unique sort of guidance, particularly when people are vulnerable, is an important part of Islamic leadership. In the interview, Dr. Jones discusses how chaplaincy moving forward must meet the needs of the growing Muslim community. As the role of Muslim chaplains becomes increasingly important, our community must take a more proactive approach in training and equipping them by developing Islamic institutions and standards that are firmly rooted in Islamic principles and equipped to engage with the modern world.

Dr. Jones discussed the current situation of leadership training for Muslim chaplains being done through Christian institutions or secular settings. I agree with his concern that this can lead to a disconnect with the values and needs of our community. There is an urgent need for Muslim-run seminaries and institutions that not only align with Islamic values and methodologies but are deeply grounded within them, thereby providing spiritually informed and culturally relevant leadership. Drawing from Isgandarova's book, chaplains and imams are more than just religious figures. They are anchors of spiritual and emotional support for their communities.

Dr. Jones emphasizes the need for Muslim-led institutions to train leaders who understand the community's unique needs. Professionalizing chaplaincy also includes setting clear standards and creating structured training. I believe the community should invest more in developing dedicated chaplaincy programs and establishing clear, widely accepted standards to equip future leaders with the necessary tools to navigate their roles effectively.

In addition, he describes chaplains as often being in interfaith spaces where they represent Islam to the wider world. Operating in public spaces should engender a heightened sense of responsibility to know and represent Islam in the best possible light. After all, there are opportunities for *daʿwa* in many of these spaces. Chaplains must be knowledgeable about Islam and have good chaplaincy soft skills to effectively navigate interfaith environments. Moreover, Dr. Jones contends that Islamic schools and seminaries of higher learning are crucial to the community's future. Robust institutions would also help prevent the loss of Islamic values in a secular society.

While I fully agree that our community must assume more responsibility in training our own chaplains to help preserve Islamic values, I recognize that there are several reasons for our delay in doing so. I feel that one of the core reasons may be rooted in both the taboo surrounding it and the general lack of awareness of its positive impact. From my perspective, there may be a certain taboo or hesitation associated with addressing spiritual care in the public sphere. Many societies have a divide between one's spiritual life and professional, secular life. There are also misconceptions about what chaplaincy involves. The idea of a religious figure acting as a counselor or guide in secular spaces can be viewed as unimportant or unnecessary. Furthermore, the chaplain's specific functions can sometimes be ambiguous. The spiritual needs of the modern Muslim community are often misunderstood. All of these factors can cause one to hesitate in embracing the role and its potential benefits.

Additionally, from my experience, there is a general lack of awareness about the profound impact that Muslim chaplains can have on individuals and communities. Unfortunately, the transformative work of a chaplain often goes unnoticed or is underappreciated. The public generally hears about chaplaincy when something goes wrong, rather than when chaplains make a significant, positive difference. Since the results of spiritual care are often intangible or difficult to measure, the profession's positive impact can be overlooked or underestimated, especially when compared to other more visible roles within institutions, such as healthcare spaces.

I believe an additional reason may be the scarcity of public case studies or widely known examples of chaplaincy's positive influence. While chaplains may serve silently in the background, few publicized stories showcase the positive difference that they make. I imagine sharing case studies taking place in our community could help alleviate this problem, for without these stories it becomes difficult for the broader public to understand or value chaplaincy's role.

To address these challenges, Muslim communities and institutions must invest in raising awareness about the field's role and potential. Publicizing success stories, case studies, and real-life examples of how chaplains have had a significant impact on individuals' lives could help shift public perception. Muslim chaplains themselves can also take proactive steps to engage with the broader community, offering talks, seminars, or interfaith initiatives that illustrate the multifaceted contributions they make.

More positive, inspiring, widely shared narratives can also reduce the taboo and raise awareness about the field. I believe that the better the perception the public has about chaplaincy and Muslim chaplains, the more persuaded people will be to support the development of Islamic seminaries to train them.

Dr. Jones saw the birth of Islamic chaplaincy in America during its key developmental time period. Through his interview, I gained a new appreciation for the foundation that his generation has provided. However, the responsibility for Islamic chaplaincy's future now lies with others. There are several practical steps toward change, among them investing in Muslim-run institutions; elevating community-wide support for chaplaincy and thereby engendering respect and support for more robust training; and developing and encouraging chaplain involvement in interfaith spaces. I am convinced that

spreading awareness about the positive, unseen work that chaplains do will lead to meaningful change.

Conclusion

The development of Islamic chaplaincy in this country is an ongoing story of growth, challenges, and institutional development. Pioneering figures like Dr. Jones have been instrumental in advocating for formalizing the relevant training programs, such as TISA, that are both culturally and theologically appropriate for American Muslims. The path forward involves strengthening these institutions and ensuring that the next generation of Muslim leaders is trained not only to serve, but also to thrive and represent Islam in a variety of American contexts.