

Integrating Muslim Spirituality and Cultural Care in Clinical Settings

Gulsen Cok*

This research brief outlines the findings of a thesis that was completed in 2025 for the degree of Master of Arts in Public and Pastoral Leadership (specialization in Spiritual Care) at the Vancouver School of Theology.

This thesis explores the integration of Islamic spiritual and cultural care within Western healthcare systems, emphasizing the importance of addressing the unique needs of Muslim patients. The author argues that as healthcare systems become increasingly diverse, accommodating the spiritual and cultural practices of Muslim patients is essential for providing holistic and compassionate care. The paper draws on Islamic teachings, psychological theories, and real-world examples to highlight the challenges and opportunities in integrating Islamic spiritual care into clinical settings. There are five key themes and arguments.

Understanding Spirituality in Islam

The thesis begins by defining spirituality, tracing its origins from the Latin word *spiritus* (breath) and its evolution across religious and secular contexts. In Islam, spirituality (*rūḥaniyya*) is deeply tied to the soul (*rūḥ*), which is considered an immortal aspect of human existence. The soul's well-being is believed to influence physical health, and Islamic spirituality emphasizes a harmonious relationship between the body and spirit. Core concepts like *imān* (faith), *islām* (wholeness), and *taqwā* (piety) underscore the importance of spiritual integrity and alignment with divine guidance.

The Role of Muslim Chaplains in Healthcare

Muslim chaplains play a critical role in bridging the gap between healthcare providers and Muslim patients. They provide spiritual guidance, facilitate religious rituals, and advocate for patients' cultural and religious needs. For example, they help patients navigate ethical dilemmas, such as end-of-life decisions, organ donation, and fasting during Ramadan. Muslim chaplains also educate hospital staff about Islamic practices, such as modesty requirements, dietary restrictions, and the importance of same-gender care providers. Their presence ensures that Muslim patients receive care that aligns with their spiritual beliefs and values.

* Gulsen Cok is a Spiritual Health Practitioner in Island Health, Vancouver Island and a Muslim interfaith spiritual caregiver at the University of Victoria. She started her journey as an industrial engineer, then finished a theology associate degree in Turkey, followed by a master's in spiritual care at the Vancouver School of Theology in British Columbia, Canada.

Challenges in Providing Spiritual Care to Muslim Patients

The thesis identifies several barriers to effective spiritual care for Muslim patients, including language barriers, lack of cultural understanding among healthcare staff, and a shortage of trained Muslim chaplains. Additionally, many Muslim patients fear discrimination, especially in the post-9/11 and post-Israel-Palestine conflict climate, which can deter them from seeking care. Non-Muslim chaplains may also lack the cultural competence to address the specific needs of Muslim patients, leading to discomfort and mistrust. The author suggests that increasing the number of trained Muslim chaplains and providing cultural competency training for healthcare staff are essential steps toward addressing these challenges.

Psychological and Spiritual Benefits of Spiritual Care

The thesis highlights the psychological and spiritual benefits of integrating spiritual care into healthcare. Research shows that spiritual support can reduce depression, improve coping mechanisms, and enhance overall well-being. For Muslim patients, spiritual care can provide comfort during illness, help them navigate feelings of guilt or despair, and offer a sense of meaning and purpose. The author shares a personal anecdote from her clinical practicum, where she helped a patient struggling with guilt after childbirth, emphasizing the transformative power of compassionate listening and spiritual guidance.

The Need for Inclusive Chaplaincy Models

The author calls for the development of inclusive chaplaincy models that respect and integrate the diverse spiritual needs of patients. This includes training chaplains in the specific rituals and practices of different faiths, particularly Islam, and fostering interfaith dialogue within healthcare settings. The thesis also emphasizes the importance of active listening, pastoral training, and cultural sensitivity in providing effective spiritual care. By creating a more inclusive and respectful healthcare environment, hospitals can better serve the spiritual and cultural needs of Muslim patients and other minority groups.

The thesis concludes that integrating Islamic spiritual and cultural care into Western healthcare systems is not only a matter of religious accommodation but also a crucial step toward achieving holistic and patient-centered care. By addressing the unique needs of Muslim patients, healthcare providers can improve patient satisfaction, enhance clinical outcomes, and foster a more inclusive and compassionate healthcare environment. The author emphasizes the urgent need for increased cultural competency training, the recruitment of more Muslim chaplains, and further research to ensure equitable access to spiritual care for all patients. Ultimately, this integration reflects a forward-thinking approach to healthcare that respects and celebrates the diversity of patient populations.