Background

Muslim chaplains now work in a number of public institutions in Britain, such as prisons, hospitals, HM Courts, educational institutions, and the military. Some are also associated with police forces, airports, and shopping centres. There are an estimated 450 Muslim chaplains in Britain today and just under half are employed by HM Prison Service. This project sought to establish:

- Who decides to become a Muslim chaplain, and why? What is the career trajectory of Muslim chaplains, and what prior experience and training do they bring to their role?
- What is involved in Muslim chaplaincy practice? What is said and done, by whom, when, where, and how, as Muslim chaplains conduct their work? What resources do they use?
- How do Muslim chaplains navigate their way through the institutional power dynamics and structures that govern their work?
- What is the impact of Muslim chaplaincy, within and beyond the institutions in which they serve?

This project reflects one of the most in-depth studies of contemporary chaplaincy in Britain, and has provided a lens through which to examine the changing role of religion in society. It has also enabled an evaluation of some the practical and theological challenges facing Muslim communities in Britain, and the broader accommodation of Islamic traditions to the dynamic of public life.

How did we do our research?

- Interviews with 65 Muslim chaplains in England and Wales
- Shadowing of 16 chaplains ‘at work’, spending a few days with each of them
- Interviews with 9 key stakeholders
- Observation of students taking the ‘Certificate in Training of Muslim Chaplains’ at Markfield Institute of Higher Education, Leicester in 2009
Focus group discussions with the ‘clients’ of Muslim chaplains in pris and young offender institutions

Comparative international research with Muslim chaplains in USA

Information derived from interviews critically depends on the degree to which chaplains can articulate what they do, and on the quality of the relationship they form with the interviewer. Some chaplains in our study were highly articulate, others less so, and this clearly shapes some of the findings and outcomes of our study. Observation and shadowing of chaplains has been critical for our research, enabling us to move away from ‘official accounts’, and to build more holistic understandings of the work of Muslim chaplains in Britain today.

Our sample of chaplains included full-time, part-time, sessional, and volunteer chaplains, male and female religious scholars (‘alim - masculine; ‘alima -feminine), and men and women without formal religious training. We included chaplains who had less than six months of experience, as well as those who had worked as chaplains for over ten years. Our chaplains were from different ‘schools’ of religious thought, and about half had been born in the UK.

Who becomes a Muslim Chaplain, and why?

Nearly two-thirds of the chaplains in our study were qualified religious professionals (‘alim or ‘alima). Among the religious professionals in our sample, nearly half reflected a broadly ‘Deobandi’ background, and many of them had trained in the UK. On the whole, they were more likely to be found in prison and health care chaplaincy, compared to other sectors. Despite the existence of a relatively homogenous and distinctive group of British-born, British-trained Deobandi Muslim chaplains, the overall Muslim chaplaincy population is extremely diverse in terms of ethnicity, prior educational experience, and school of religious thought.

Over the last decade, Muslim chaplains have formed associations to support their professional work, signalling a move towards growing collective identity and representation, and increasing professionalisation. This has been stimulated by the development of entry-level educational programmes, such as the ‘Certificate in Training of Muslim Chaplains’ run by Markfield Institute of Higher Education in Leicester.
The increasing recruitment of women into chaplaincy is evident in all sectors. Many of them are drawn to chaplaincy because it is an extension of previous or current community-based roles, such as counselling, teaching, or relevant voluntary work. Presently, relatively few of them are religious scholars, and they are nearly all part-time.

The profile of those in educational chaplaincy is quite different, compared to other sectors. They are typically volunteers, and usually undertake their chaplaincy work as an extension of a lecturing position, or professional academic support role. They are usually much older than chaplains in other sectors, have usually been born overseas, and very few of them are qualified religious professionals. However, they tend to have high levels of mainstream education, and many hold a university or higher degree. Interestingly, a higher proportion of them are ‘converts’ to Islam, relative to other sectors.

We wanted to understand the motivations for entering chaplaincy work, and found that it provides an opportunity to exercise religious leadership in a way that combines the fulfilment of religious duty alongside community service.

“This job brings to life all the stuff I’ve learned about the Prophet, peace be upon him, his forgiveness, him helping people, his struggle”.

“I do love what I do, I love the responsibilities that I have, the role that I play, the awareness that I bring, the guidance that I give, the care that I provide, the shoulder, the ear that I give. These are more rewarding than any position or salary, to me”.
What do Muslim chaplains do?

There are wide variations in the role performed by chaplains in different sectors, further accentuated by the terms of their employment (full-time, part-time, sessional, or voluntary). These differences are so great, that we might have looked at chaplaincy practice in each sector individually. However, at the most fundamental level, chaplains in all sectors are negotiating the practice of Islam and managing the needs of Muslim service-users, within their institutions. For this reason, there is value in looking at how they do this collectively, irrespective of context.

Chaplains undertake the routine and statutory duties associated with chaplaincy in their respective contexts, while also taking particular responsibility for the needs of Muslims, such as overseeing Ramadan fasting or Eid festival arrangements. But some of the stories gathered during our research indicate a role that often goes well beyond the ‘routine’, to include such things as troubleshooting at times of major incident or institutional failure. In such instances, the authority that chaplains embody can often bring actual or potential disorder under control. Chaplains have also recounted many stories about successful pastoral outcomes that they attribute to divine intervention.

Employment status is a major determinant of role. Chaplains who are employed on a part-time, voluntary, or sessional basis tend to focus primarily upon provision of practical pastoral care. Chaplains who are employed full-time have a broader role that includes not only pastoral care, but also more involvement in shaping of institutional policy, as well as staff training. A small number of experienced, full-time ‘super-chaplains’ have now acquired a national profile, and contribute to training and policy-making at this level.
The predominance of religious scholars in Muslim chaplaincy in Britain means that there is considerable emphasis in their practice on establishing how and in what ways the requirements of the shari‘ah can be fulfilled within a public, multi-faith, institution. Consequently, chaplaincy is a particularly interesting ‘site’ for the contextualisation of Islam in Britain and the development of new interpretations of Islamic law, especially in relation to what counts as ‘halal’ or ‘haram’.

It’s [chaplaincy] changed my view of the world, it’s changed my view of the way people act and interact as well, I think it’s changed me profoundly because what I’ve noticed, I’ve become a lot more liberal, fiqh [law] wise. It’s sort of really opened my mind up. Because I’m always trying to help people, as long as there’s fiqh [law] there to help the people”.

There seems little doubt that Muslim chaplains in Britain are involved in different levels and forms of interpretive effort (ijtihad) as they translate the principles of the shari‘ah into the practice of chaplaincy. Where this might sometimes involve new interpretive judgement, in other cases it might entail the decision to search for alternative Islamic legal opinions. By force of necessity and circumstance, some chaplains are sometimes availing themselves of the opportunity to ‘pick and choose’ between Hanafi, Maliki, Hanbali, Shafi’i and Ja‘fari traditions.

Chaplains are highly aware of the opportunities and the constraints of their position, and the ways in which the role of chaplain is distinctive to that of Imam.

‘when I sit on the mimbar I will tell the person, “you should do it like this” and when I’m here in the hospital, I will present it that “here is the Islamic position and now it’s for you to choose”. When you are the Imam you are basically expected to tell the people what to do... that is your role; when you are within the hospital, you are not expected to tell people what to do, you are expected to provide the information... so the role is different”.

Many chaplains speak and use a variety of languages in their work, apart from English. Most have some Arabic, and usually a range of South Asian community languages in addition. They are often the most multi-lingual staff in their respective institutions. Their linguistic capacities add to their authority and credibility amongst staff and clients, but they are also ‘translators’ between various cultural traditions and institutional worldviews. Many chaplains have become adept in articulating the needs of Muslim clients in a way that is meaningful to a variety of audiences, while also resonating with the ethos of public service in multi-faith, secular institutions.

It is clear that Muslim chaplains have an important educative role. Many are involved in staff training and induction, and they value the opportunity to promote more informed understanding of Islam. They also recognise the importance of working within an effective multi-faith ‘team’, and see this as an example for the wider institution about the positive role of Muslims in social cohesion.

Politics: what internal and external pressures shape the work of Muslims in chaplaincy?

The involvement of Muslims in chaplaincy work is now taken-for-granted in many publicly-funded institutions. Some Muslims have acquired senior chaplaincy management roles, and have been recognised for their work at a national level, especially those in full-time roles. However, Muslim chaplains still have to manage instances of inter-religious rivalry within chaplaincy teams, especially around the allocation of staff-time and budgets, and, the use of facilities.
There is now some degree of internal rivalry within the Muslim chaplaincy population. This tends to revolve around the question of religious qualifications, authority, and experience. Religious scholars acknowledge the contribution that self-taught or ‘lay’ chaplains can make, but are clear that authoritative religious advice can only be given by those with appropriate religious training. This emphasis is reinforcing the ‘professionalisation’ of Muslim chaplaincy, but is also excluding from chaplaincy those Muslims from communities without established training institutions and associated scholarly networks.

Imam Yunus Dudhwala, Head of Chaplaincy Services, Newham University Hospital NHS Trust

Internal tensions also reflect the various ‘schools of thought’ that chaplains identify with. However, these tensions tend to be a reflection of wider British Muslim community politics, and are rarely about the nature of chaplaincy work itself. Indeed, there is a widespread consensus among chaplains about the qualities of a ‘good chaplain’, and remarkably little disagreement about what the role entails. To some extent, chaplaincy is a lens through which many of the issues and debates about Muslims in Britain can be seen in microcosm.

By far the most significant ‘politics’ around Muslim chaplaincy has been in the form of interventions bound up with Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) policies. This has had both positive and negative consequences. From a negative perspective, efforts have been made in recent years to place ‘Prevent’ squarely within the job description of Muslim chaplains (but not chaplains of other faiths). Many Muslim chaplains have effectively resisted these efforts as an unwelcome and unnecessary intrusion into their professional work. More positively, PVE funding has stimulated opportunities for the in-service training of Muslim prison chaplains. This has supported their professionalization, and has enabled chaplains from different legal and religious schools of thought to debate issues of common concern together. Our research shows that prison chaplaincy training provides one of the few instances of sustained scholarly intra-faith dialogue within British Muslim communities.
Potential: the impact of chaplaincy?

Muslim offenders who took part in our focus group discussions stated that chaplains provide them with positive role models, remind them of Islamic virtues, and provide a visual stimulus of their religious identity.

‘when you are around the imam or when the imam goes past you [in the corridor], the first words that normally come to you are like “Assalamu alaikum” and ....you’re being reminded of Allah’ (a Muslim young offender).

However, the nature and degree of religious support and instruction that chaplains can provide for prisoners is rarely available in wider society. Relatively few mosques or Islamic organisations in Britain are committed to providing pastoral and social support for prisoners making the transition from prison to community. The work of ‘community chaplains’ is extremely valuable in this respect, and offers good prospects for breaking the cycle of re-offending. More research needs to be done to document its efficacy.

Meanwhile, the work of Muslim ‘community chaplains’, and indeed chaplains in other sectors, could be greatly enhanced by more interest and involvement from Muslim volunteers in local communities. But while there is still widespread ignorance about the nature of the chaplaincy role (especially among older generations) this may prove challenging in the short term.

“There’s a big community out there that has no idea what a ‘chaplain’ means”.

The findings from our project confirm that Muslim chaplains are engaged in an important process of contextualising Islamic traditions in the UK. However, our research has established this very important and significant work is largely remaining within the relatively narrow confines of chaplaincy work. We asked the question in our research about the potential of Muslim chaplaincy, and sought to find out how and to what extent it is influencing community-based leadership. Our findings suggest that it is not, and the experiences of
Muslim chaplains are, generally speaking, making relatively little impact beyond the institutions in which they work, or the relatively small world of Muslim chaplaincy itself. This is a somewhat disappointing finding, but in many ways it is similar to the experiences of chaplains from other faith traditions. For example, many Christian chaplains report a sense of alienation from the wider Church, and tend to feel that their experiences at the cutting edge of human transitions are ignored pastorally, theologically, and professionally.

“Asgar Halim Rajput, Muslim Chaplain at Brunel University, London”. (By kind permission of the Association of Muslim Chaplains in Education).

International comparisons: a view from the USA

Following a series of interviews with Muslim chaplains in the USA, we were able to consider how and in what ways the experiences of Muslim chaplains in the UK might be distinctive. For example, unlike their UK colleagues (who are predominantly from South Asia and are often religious scholars) American Muslim chaplains come from a myriad of backgrounds with a large percentage of them being indigenous white American converts, and Black African-Americans. Few have done any formal traditional Islamic theology, but, most of them have done Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) training, and a lot of them have completed the Hartford Seminary Masters of Divinity chaplaincy course. Consequently, their practice of chaplaincy tends to be more holistic and less law (fiqh) orientated. Indeed, many of them regard a fiqh-based chaplaincy as somehow missing the point. They note that even when asked questions relating to Islamic law, rather than finding the answer in a law book, they try to look behind the question and explore the deeper issues involved.
Prior to 9/11, there was little public awareness or interest in the work of Muslim chaplains in the USA. After 9/11 however, chaplains have become the face of Islam in public institutions. As religious professionals working in mainstream society, the American public are often speaking to these chaplains, rather than mosque imams, for a better understanding of Islam. As a direct outcome of their work, American Muslim chaplains are actively contributing to wider society, and the development of their profession. They are energetically documenting, reflecting on, and writing about their work. There is more evidence in the USA, compared to the UK, that Muslim chaplains are also raising standards and expectations about community-based religious leadership. Furthermore, they are pro-actively using their skills back in their communities. For example, some have helped to form networks of support for vulnerable groups in society, such as women suffering domestic violence, or young people.

Back in Britain, the development of an articulate discourse about Muslim involvement in chaplaincy in Britain is yet to emerge. It will only occur when chaplains here similarly begin to reflect on, and write about their work from a theoretical and theological perspective. This is yet to happen, but represents an important and exciting opportunity and challenge for the future.

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Thank you.
Main publications from the research to date


2011, S. Gilliat-Ray, ‘Being There’: Shadowing a British Muslim Hospital Chaplain’, *Qualitative Research*, vol. 11 (5): 469-486


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The Islam-UK Centre at Cardiff University

Cardiff University is now a leading institution for scholarly teaching about Islam and Muslims in contemporary Britain. The Islam-UK Centre is based within the School of History, Archaeology and Religion, and is recognised globally for its research. We have a wealth of teaching expertise and a lively programme of research activity. Within our degree programme there are a range of possibilities for studying Islam and classical Arabic. The Centre has a strong and positive relationship with the local Muslim community. Local Muslims form part of the Centre’s advisory committee, and we are proud of this partnership. For further information about the MA ‘Islam in Contemporary Britain’ and the associated Jameel Scholarships, please email the Postgraduate Secretary: adminshare@cardiff.ac.uk

Yusuf Islam opened the Islam-UK Centre in September 2005, in front of 400 guests

Children from a Muslim primary school in Cardiff attended the launch of the Islam-UK Centre in 2005