

Muslim Chaplains are changing Chaplaincy, and Chaplaincy is changing Islam in Britain

Between 2008 and 2012 Dr Sophie Gilliat-Ray led a team, funded by [Religion and Society](#), conducting the first systematic study of Muslim chaplaincy in the UK. They found that far from simply being 'lost in the system', the appointment of Muslim chaplains in prisons and hospitals since the 1990s has had significant effects on how chaplaincy is understood and practised – and even on the development of Islam in Britain.



Chaplaincy has a long history in British hospitals, prisons, the military, and other sectors. The 1952 Prisons Act stipulates the appointment of an Anglican chaplain in prisons, and in hospitals an Anglican chaplain is usually appointed to fulfill the 1991 Patient Charter. Both are ultimately funded by taxes. Over time, however, other Christian denominations and other religions have become involved in order better to serve society's shifting religious demographics. The Muslim community is now the second largest religious group in the UK, and since the 1990s when Muslim chaplains were initially appointed part-time within the NHS, their number and professionalism have been increasing. Muslim chaplains now provide support to Muslim patients and prisoners, and demand is driving provision in other settings such as universities and airports. So far there remains only one full-time Muslim chaplain in the armed forces. What are the effects?

In order to answer the question the research team carried out extensive qualitative research, including shadowing chaplains going about their work, and holding focus groups. They also interviewed 65 Muslim chaplains (around 15% of the total number), both male and female from a range of sectors, and serving full-time, part-time, on a sessional basis and voluntarily. They observed teaching for the Certificate in Training of Muslim Chaplains course at the Markfield Institute of Higher Education in Leicester. Over the course of the project they developed a strong relationship with many chaplains – even playing a role in bringing them into wider contact with one another.

About half of the Muslim chaplains were found to be British-born, nearly two-thirds were qualified religious professionals, and nearly half came from a broadly 'Deobandi' background, many having trained in the UK. As such they broadly reflect the ethnic, linguistic, racial and religious diversity of Islam in Britain. The team found considerable variety in terms of attitude and approach, even amongst the Deobandi graduates.

In many ways Muslim chaplaincy is also helping to shape Islam in Britain, particularly in terms of religious leadership. Muslim chaplains are carving out a new leadership role within Islam. They are increasingly professionalised, with a stake in the institutions they serve, and a commitment to maintain professional standards. They have to combine this with their faith leadership role in new and creative ways. Because they have to offer clear teaching and guidance to all Muslims in an institution, chaplaincies tend to foster a form of Islam which transcends differences between different legal schools, and offers a single message. Chaplains spoke of learning

from the wide cultural backgrounds of those they served, and broadening their own understanding in the process. Various traditions are drawn upon to interpret Islamic law in context. They bridge linguistic and cultural divides, and serve to mediate between differences and connect the worlds of elderly, first generation South-Asian Urdu-speaking migrants and younger generations of British-born Muslims.

As well as providing a career for educated and religiously committed young Muslim men, chaplaincy is increasingly attracting Muslim women across all sectors. Relatively few of these female chaplains are religious scholars and nearly all are part-time. Nevertheless, chaplaincy could prove important in forging new female leadership roles in Islam.

Muslim chaplains are also having a significant impact on the development of chaplaincy. Many practices have to be negotiated – for example, with the local undertaker to ensure that burial can take place within 24 hours as required by Islamic norms. In the process, existing practices may be modified – for example, the use of MRI scanning for post-mortems was an innovation brought about by Muslim chaplains responding to need, and is now being more widely adopted. Muslim chaplain's practice of connecting prisoners with their families is also innovative.

Of course the picture is not all rosy. Within chaplaincy teams there were found to be the usual inter-religious battles over staff time, budgets and facilities. Within Muslim chaplaincy there is sometimes rivalry concerning qualifications and authority. There are also tensions created by wider initiatives. The Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) agenda was incorporated into the job descriptions of Muslim chaplains and *not* those of other faiths – but it nevertheless stimulated in-service training of Muslim prison chaplains, creating one of the few opportunities for sustained scholarly intra-faith dialogue for British Muslim communities. Whilst Muslim prisoners reported their appreciation of the input from their chaplains, support for the transition from prison back into the community is still a neglected area, and chaplaincy funding in general is under threat in many places.

There is still more work to do before Muslim chaplains in Britain develop an articulate discourse about their chaplaincy work, as has happened in the US. Where many Muslim chaplains in Britain are traditionally-trained religious scholars, Muslim chaplains in the US tend to rely on their broader educational and social capital to develop the profession and their contribution to chaplaincy discourse. But chaplains on both sides of the Atlantic find themselves becoming the face of Islam in public institutions post 9/11, and so the ability to engage multiple audiences and contexts is becoming a vital skill. Change has already been rapid, and more is to be expected.

Find out more...

- Visit the project's web pages:
<http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/share/research/centres/csi/research/muslimchaplaincyproject/index.html>
- Look up Sophie Gilliat-Ray 2008 'From 'Visiting Minister' to 'Muslim Chaplain': the growth of Muslim chaplaincy in Britain, 1970-2007' in *The Centrality of Religion in Social Life: Essays in Honour of James A. Beckford* edited by Eileen Barker, published by Ashgate, pp 145-157.
http://www.ashgate.com/default.aspx?page=637&title_id=9174&edition_id=11347&calcTitle=1; 2010

'Body-works and fieldwork: Research with British Muslim chaplains', *Culture and Religion* vol. 11, no 4, 413-432: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14755610.2010.527615>; 2011 'Being There': Shadowing a British Muslim Hospital Chaplain', *Qualitative Research*, vol. 11, no 5, 469-486, and M. Mansur Ali and Sophie Gilliat-Ray 2012 'Muslim Chaplains: Working at the Interface of 'Public' and 'Private' in *Muslims in Britain: Making Social and Political Space* edited by Waqar Ahmad and Ziauddin Sardar. London: Routledge: <http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415594721/>

- Keep an eye out for the book from the project *Understanding Muslim Chaplaincy* to be published as part of the Ashgate AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society book series: <http://www.ashgate.com/default.aspx?page=4695>

You might also be interested in...

- The Muslim Participation in Contemporary Governance project also funded by Religion and Society: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/ethnicity/projects/muslimparticipation/>
- Layla Welford's doctoral investigation of healthcare chaplaincy: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2011_03/1301491293_Todd_Phase_1_Collaborative_Studentship_Block.pdf
- The Programme-funded Multi-Faith Spaces project: <http://www.sed.manchester.ac.uk/architecture/research/mfs/>
- The new Programme book *Religion and Change in Modern Britain* to which Sophie Gilliat-Ray contributed the section on Islam: <http://www.routledge.com/cw/woodhead-9780415575812/>

Project Details

Award Title

Leadership and Capacity Building in the British Muslim Community: the case of Muslim chaplains

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Association of Muslim Chaplains in Higher Education (Asgar Halim Rajput)

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