

Muslim Chaplaincy in the U.S.

Summary: Muslim chaplains provide faith-based counsel and guidance in institutional contexts (the military, schools, hospitals, and correctional facilities, among others). Historically, Muslim chaplains grew through the da'wah practice of prison ministries, particularly through the Nation of Islam and the activism of Malcolm X (El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz). Today, Muslim chaplains form networks through various chaplaincy organizations.

Though chaplaincy has roots in the Christian tradition, Muslims in America have embraced the model as a way to provide faith-based guidance in institutional contexts, particularly in the military, on campuses, in hospitals, and in correctional facilities. Muslim chaplains often serve both Muslims and non-Muslims, offering spiritual support and guidance, and in recent years, chaplains have acted as intra-institutional leaders who work towards greater interfaith understanding and community engagement. Muslim chaplains are often the face of Islam in these institutions and beyond, and their history in America is intricately interwoven with social attitudes about Islam and the changing demographics of the nation's Muslim population.

The history of Muslim chaplaincy in the United States begins with prison ministries, particularly rooted in the Nation of Islam. Malcolm X, who later changed his name to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, is one of the most well-known Americans to have embraced Islam while in prison. He explains in his autobiography, "I found Allah and the religion of Islam and it completely transformed my life." Malcolm X later adopted a more orthodox practice of Islam, citing his travels to the Middle East and Africa as the beginning of his exploration of Islam as a way to bridge racial divides. Malcolm X's experience with Muslim prison ministries speaks to the myriad ways of being Muslim, as well as to the complexity of conversion. It also speaks to the early focus among Muslim chaplains upon outreach, or *da'wah*, to prisoners who may never have heard about Islam before.

Today, Muslim chaplaincy in the United States has moved away from *da'wah* towards a focus on support and pastoral care, according to the Association of Muslim Chaplains, a professional organization founded in 2011. Many networks now exist for Muslim chaplains to discuss their practice, connect with others, and access useful resources. The Association of Muslim Chaplains and the Muslim Chaplains Association are two such organizations, both open to a wide range of interpretations of the

Islamic tradition while maintaining core values of respect, faith, and compassion. Today, Muslim chaplains are not necessarily imams and their ranks may include both men and women. Most chaplains will serve a Muslim community in which multiple interpretations of Islam coexist. In correctional facilities, for example, some prisoners may embrace Sunni Islam or Shi'ah Islam, while others affiliate themselves with the Nation of Islam or the Five Percenters. In recent decades, Muslim chaplains have actively sought recognition of dietary requirements within prison settings and have fought for the rights of the incarcerated to meet with representatives of their faith, to receive religious literature, and to gather regularly for prayer and weekly Jum'ah.

Muslim chaplains can gain accreditation in the United States in one of several ways. Accreditation can occur through completion of clinical pastoral care education programs or through the Hartford Seminary's Islamic Chaplaincy program, which trains chaplains to work in interfaith and single faith community settings through coursework in Islamic studies and Muslim-Christian relations, among other subjects. The Islamic Society of North America offers endorsements of chaplaincy candidates, which are often required by organizations before a chaplain can be hired. This network of organizations provides support to Muslim chaplains practicing in a wide array of contexts. Currently, the Department of Defense also administers a program to certify Muslim chaplains in which accreditation occurs through the Hartford Seminary.

In 1993, the army appointed the first Muslim chaplain of the U.S. armed forces. Since then, Muslim chaplains have become an important voice within the military, particularly during periods of American involvement in predominantly Muslim countries. During the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan begun after 9/11, Muslim chaplains were seen as liaisons between Muslims and non-Muslims, both within the military itself and between military personnel and local civilians. Muslim chaplains now serve in all branches of the military and are trained to serve all soldiers, often functioning as advisors to the unit as a whole. Chaplains are also expected to teach about religious pluralism and respect, both among soldiers and in the civilian population where they are stationed. To this end, there has been a concerted effort on the part of the Department of Defense to attract qualified Muslim chaplains to the military.

As the number of Muslim students attending colleges and universities has increased in recent decades, so too has the presence of Muslim chaplains on campuses across the nation. In 1993, Wellesley became

the first university to appoint a Muslim chaplain; Georgetown University followed in 1999 and became the first to hire a Muslim chaplain in a full-time capacity. In 2017, Harvard University hired its first full-time Muslim chaplain.

Campus chaplains are often expected to serve as spiritual advisors and promoters of interfaith engagement in addition to leading religious seminars, workshops and service initiatives. Funding can prove to be an impediment to appointing a Muslim chaplain, particularly on campuses where there may not be a large population of Muslim students. Often, it can be difficult for universities—especially public ones—to hire chaplains at all; as a result, many chaplains work part-time or serve in a volunteer capacity. At the same time, the growing number of Muslim chaplains reflects a rising demand among Muslim students for institutional support comparable to that which their peers of other faiths receive through campus chaplaincy programs.

Although the presence of Muslim chaplains in the United States is becoming more common, individuals still face challenges. Prejudice against Islam, particularly after 9/11, continue to influence perceptions of Muslims in the military and other chaplaincy settings. In 2003, James Yee, a former Army chaplain and a practicing Muslim, was charged with sedition while stationed at Guantanamo Bay. Although all charges were eventually dropped and he was honorably discharged in 2005, he is but one example of how perceptions of Islam impact Muslim chaplains in unique ways. Yee now speaks and writes about his experience and about Islam in America.

Muslim chaplains in correctional facilities face criticism by people claiming that they are spreading a radical, dangerous interpretation of Islam to the prisoners. However, a significant study of prisoner radicalization, funded by the National Institute of Justice and published in 2008, suggests that one way to counter religious radicalism in prisoners is to hire more Muslim chaplains—as well as Muslim security personnel—in order to ensure that prisoners are not left with little spiritual guidance in a system where they already feel marginalized. Muslim Chaplain Services of Virginia is one example of an organization working towards greater support of Muslim prisoners. As a non-profit, faith-based organization, Muslim Chaplain Services of Virginia serves Muslim prisoners during and after their time in prison. In 2000, the Virginia government awarded the organization a \$25,000 grant to continue their work, signalling an investment in the possibilities for greater engagement of Muslim chaplains in America today.

Despite the difficulties they have faced, individual Muslim chaplains have also been praised greatly for their service and commitment. One of the most important figures in the Bay Area Muslim Community, for example, is Imam Abu Qadir Al-Amin, the former leader of the San Francisco Muslim Community Center. His commitment to ministry is strengthened by his own personal experience: after a year of incarceration on San Quentin's death row, he embraced Islam. The death penalty was repealed in 1972, and he was released six years later, then becoming active in lecturing and teaching in prisons. Imam Al-Amin went on to lead one of the most thriving and diverse communities in the Bay Area, was a member of the Northern California Majlis al-Shurah, and has received numerous civic awards for his community activism, both in the prisons and the inner city. He is now the resident imam of the San Francisco Muslim Community Center in the city's Excelsior district.