

Muslim chaplaincies in France, between appropriation and instrumentalization by public authorities

Claire de Galembert¹

(CNRS/ENS Paris-Saclay - France)

Abstract

Over the past thirty years or more, Muslim chaplaincies have been institutionalized in France's military, hospital and prison systems. This institutionalization gained momentum from the 2000s onwards. The number of Muslim chaplains has risen sharply since the creation of the French Council of the Muslim Faith, but it is above all the fear of radical Islam that has aroused unprecedented interest in chaplaincy on the part of public authorities.

My paper will explore this institutionalization, its motives and its modalities. I will underline the asymmetry between the interest shown by public authorities in the development of chaplaincies for Islam, on the one hand, and the low level of investment by Muslim communities in an institution with which they are not familiar, on the other. I will show that this institutionalization, which is part of a public policy to organize Islam in France, operates at the crossroads of two framings: a legal framing that places Islam on an equal footing with other religions; and a security framing, particularly evident in the case of prison chaplaincies. In particular, fears of a deregulated Islam have led to new demands for professionalization, which today apply to all chaplains, whatever their religion.

Although this new role is now being taken on by both Muslim communities and the public concerned, internal divisions within Islam in France continue to hinder the emergence of collective players who are independent of the public authorities. This limits the development of a common ethos, and leads Muslim chaplains to see themselves, more than their counterparts of other faiths, as actors in the public service. As a result, they are more vulnerable to attempts at instrumentalization by public authorities, which I will illustrate with a number of examples.

The talk will be based on three surveys carried out since 2009, the first (2008-2012) on religion in prison (2013, 2016), the second (2017-2019) on prison chaplains (2019, to be published in 2025), the third (2019-2022) on an inter-institutional comparison, prison, armed forces, hospital (2022, to be published 2024).

¹ Claire de Galembert holds a PhD in Political Science. Based at the Institut des Sciences Sociales of the École Normale Supérieure Paris-Saclay, she is a CNRS research fellow. She works on the public management of religion, combining the sociologies of public action, law and religion. She has been working for over ten years on religious issues in prisons and has conducted the largest study of Muslim chaplaincies in France. Her work focuses on the role of security policies in the development of Muslim chaplaincies in France. In 2024, she was awarded her Habilitation (HDR), a post-doctoral diploma attesting to the high scientific quality of the researcher's work on the theme "Revisiting laicity beyond the wall of separation".

Notes

Céline Béraud, Claire de Galembert, Corinne Rostaing (2016). *De la religion en prison, Enquête sociologique*. Presses Universitaires de Rennes.

Céline Béraud, Claire de Galembert, Corinne Rostaing (2013). *Des hommes et des dieux en prison*. Commandité par la Direction de l'Administration Pénitentiaire et co-financé par le GIP Justice.

Céline Béraud, Anne Fornerod, Claire de Galembert (2022). *Les géométries variables de l'aumônerie musulmane. Comparaison inter-institutionnelle* (Prison, Armée, Hôpital). Rapport de Recherche remis au Bureau Central des cultes, ministère de l'Intérieur. A paraître en 2024 aux Presses Universitaires d'Aix-Marseille.

Céline Béraud, Claire de Galembert (2019). *La fabrique de l'aumônerie musulmane de prison*. Rapport remis à la Direction de l'Administration Pénitentiaire et à la mission Droit et Justice.