

Breaking Barriers: Muslim Women in Chaplaincy and Pastoral Leadership

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the involvement of Muslim women in professional chaplaincy, and the way in which this arena of religious work offers opportunities for leadership that can be more difficult for women to achieve in Muslim community settings, such as mosques. Some of the most important recent Muslim chaplaincy research indicates how female Muslim chaplains are beginning to disturb prevalent ideas about Islamic religious leadership as an outcome of their chaplaincy experience and practice. The complementary roles of male and female chaplains are now clearly evidenced, alongside the distinction between ritual, religious, and pastoral leadership. However, it would appear that the growing involvement of Muslim women in professional chaplaincy is beginning to shape assumptions within Muslim communities and congregations about the kind of pastoral care and leadership that Muslim organisations now require. More mosques (at least in the UK) are developing into active community centres, and this is raising questions and expectations about access and support for Muslim women. Qualitative social scientific research derived from the 'Imams' project at Cardiff University has indicated a growing demand for the provision of pastoral care in mosque/community settings - delivered by women (who may or may not be religious scholars / *'ālimāt*) – and modelled on the kind of roles undertaken by female Muslim chaplains in prisons, hospitals, educational, and other settings. This paper reflects on these developments and considers their implications for the development of Muslim community leadership and the role of women as religious authority figures in Islam.

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