

## **Muslim Chaplains in America: Voices from the First Wave**

**S.E. Jihad Levine**

In October of 2000, James Yee joined the ranks of the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps as one of its very first Muslim chaplains. It was a historic event. In 2003 Chaplain Yee was again making history. After a short assignment in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, where he ministered to Muslim prisoners detained after September 11, he himself was detained, arrested, and incarcerated on unsubstantiated charges. They were eventually dropped, but not before Chaplain Yee's career and reputation were ruined. His name and picture were plastered all over newspapers, magazines, and television. In this sensational way, many Muslims in America were introduced to the concept of Islamic chaplaincy for the first time.

Today, a few short years later, Muslim chaplains can be found in major institutions all across the United States. They work in hospitals, helping patients and their families to make major medical decisions within an Islamic framework. They can be found in the U.S. military, ministering to service-

---

S. E. Jihad Levine, 239 Corcyra Rd., Sunbury, PA 17801 (E-mail: Jihadlevine@verizon.net).

Copyright © 2008, S.E. Jihad Levine.

*Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry*

men and women. In jails and prisons, they counsel inmates considering conversion to Islam, teach Arabic classes, and lead Friday congregational prayer. On college campuses, they guide the Muslim Student Association and participate in interfaith gatherings. The New York City Police Department recently hired its second Muslim chaplain, and fire departments are hiring them as well. Word of this new creature, the Muslim chaplain, is beginning to spread.

#### MUSLIM CHAPLAINS WERE ONCE VERY FEW

Muslim chaplains, who offer spiritual advice and care to those of all faiths within their area of service, are different from *imams*, who serve specific liturgical needs within the Muslim community. Although an imam may act as a chaplain, he will likely be in need of chaplaincy education in order to do the job well. Meanwhile, it is not necessary for a chaplain to be an imam in order to work in the field of chaplaincy. Imams are male. Muslim chaplains may be male or female. And Muslim chaplains, along with offering pastoral care, carry out another crucial function: they are unofficial ambassadors of their often-misunderstood religion. As Captain Yee discovered, there are some risks attached to this role. But the more Muslim chaplains become accessible and accepted in the larger community, the more anti-Islamic prejudice is likely to be reduced.

"I think that the presence of Muslim chaplains is instrumental in that regard," states hospital chaplain Doha Hamza, original Volunteer Chaplain and Muslim Volunteer Coordinator at Stanford Hospital and Clinics and Lucile Packard Children's Hospital. "They interact with everybody," she explains, "on a very deep level, a humane and intimate level that reduces all this bias and shows a different face of Islam. The cultural competency trainings we give to the staff at the hospital have been very helpful." Chaplain Hamza believes that training offered by Muslim chaplains also affords an opportunity for ongoing dialogue between the chaplain and the institution that facilitates greater understanding.

Besides providing spiritual support to hospital patients and staff, the program Chaplain Hamza founded coordinates the efforts of the hospital's volunteer group and provides training for new Muslim volunteers. "We are in charge of organizing events about Islam and Muslims at the hospital. We now also have events like *Ramadan* and *Eid* at the hospital every year," she

says. Program members serve the community by participating in activities such as mosque health fairs and Muslim chaplain conferences. And they are beginning to generate publications.

Still, those she serves are often surprised by her existence, and Muslims most of all. Chaplain Hamza explains. "Our Muslim community [in America] is only now just starting to understand what a Muslim chaplain does. Many Muslim countries do not have healthcare providers beyond nurses and doctors, let alone chaplains, and spiritual care is traditionally offered by the family of the patient."

Chaplain Hamza says that pastoral service has completely transformed who she is. "It has been the blessing of my life, has taught me a lot of the reality of life, the fragility of life, the preciousness and sacredness of life. It has taught me that by the end of the day, our sound relationships with others, kind manners, humbleness, loved ones, service, and care for each other is all that counts. I now understand and appreciate more why there is so much emphasis in our tradition on visiting the sick. Part of it, of course, is the joy you bring to their lives, but also a big part of it is the profound lessons one learns about his or her own life."

#### AN EARLY MUSLIM PRISON CHAPLAIN

Chaplain Hamza is not the only groundbreaking Muslim chaplain to love her job. Abu Ishaq Abdul-Hafiz just retired after serving for twenty years as Muslim chaplain at Los Angeles Metropolitan Detention Center/Federal Correctional Institution Terminal Island. He was the longest-serving Muslim chaplain in the federal system. "*Allah* has given me the best years of my life serving people who need to know they are not alone, and how Allah provides for them even as they thought they were abandoned," he says.

Chaplain Abdul-Hafiz was trained as an imam. "Chaplaincy was not something I had ever considered when I studied and trained to serve as an imam, but I had asked Allah to let me learn so I could help those in need," he says. "Never entering my mind was prison or corrections, but when the opportunity came, I had to remember what I said in my *du`a* [prayer request]. I took the challenge and said, 'Who is in more need than Muslims in prison?' Little did I know I would serve far more than Muslims in prison, but rather people—people who have come from all walks of life and every faith tradition."

Chaplain Abdul-Hafiz states that Muslim chaplains in correctional settings advocate for inmates' right to practice the tenets of their faith tradition. Even though there are restrictions, inmates have a constitutional right to practice their belief while incarcerated. The Muslim chaplain provides religious instruction and leads services for Muslim inmates. He develops and supervises religious programs and recruits volunteers and contractors to meet the needs of inmates. He also serves as an expert for prison administrators in addressing religious issues and concerns in a correctional setting and assists in developing related policy. Like the hospital chaplain, the Muslim chaplain in the correctional setting provides training about Islam and Muslims to prison staff. He provides emergency notifications to inmates when death and serious illness befall their family members and to family members when death comes to an inmate. The Muslim chaplain also establishes relationships with local religious leaders of all faiths and works with groups that facilitate re-entry. He provides the Muslim inmate with a sense of connection to the faith community outside.

"Many within the American Muslim public do not realize the significant role we must play to have our community recognized as a fully invested participant in healing the wounds of those in the lowest ebb of society," Chaplain Abdul-Hafiz states. "They don't understand that for us as a community to be seen and accepted as part of America, we must be visible and active in addressing the problems we are confronted with collectively as a nation. Our public position provides us the opportunity to correct misconceptions about Islam and Muslim people. It allows us to be in the decision-making process, taking a role where we can lead and become part of the leadership of the society and social norms."

In the current hostile situation where anything Islamic is viewed with suspicion, it is a role the value of which cannot be underestimated. Often Muslims themselves have misconceptions and prejudices that can challenge the Muslim chaplain, and specifically, the Muslim prison chaplain.

#### ETHICAL DILEMMAS FOR THE MUSLIM CHAPLAIN

In prison populations, where the majority of Muslim inmates are African-American, issues of racism and cultural differences can cause ethical dilemmas for the Muslim chaplain. If the Muslim chaplain is African-American himself, he may have to deal with these issues personally in addition to

resolving them for the inmates. One such African-American chaplain from the “first wave” is Dawud Adib. He was born in inner city Newark, New Jersey, and accepted Islam in 1975. He is a well-known and widely respected teacher, writer, and lecturer who has served as the imam of five *masjids* (mosques) in America. His Islam for the New Muslim series is well known in Muslim circles. Dawud Adib served as a Department of Corrections chaplain from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s in New Jersey, New York, and Maryland. He also served as an active participant in the “Life Connections” program at Leavenworth Federal Prison.

“Since I was an African-American chaplain, both Muslim and non-Muslim inmates alike gravitated toward me,” he said. Why? Because Chaplain Adib had life experience and understood the issues of the inmates firsthand. “I was from the streets. They could relate to me.” Chaplain Adib’s positive relationship with the inmates, although professional at all times, caused him to be viewed with suspicion by some prison officials. “One administrator told me to my face that he saw me as an inmate with keys,” Chaplain Adib remembers.

Chaplain Adib believes that it is critical for the Muslim chaplain to be a vital member of the prison’s cultural diversity training team. “Everyone, from the administrators to the corrections officers, needs to be educated about the roots of racism and prejudice in America,” he points out.

Cultural differences among Muslims also represent a challenge in the prison environment. Chaplain Adib stresses that Muslim chaplains from countries in the Middle East, North Africa, and Pakistan must also receive cultural diversity training if they are to be completely successful in working with and helping African-American inmates. Unfortunately, the shared brotherhood in Islam is often not enough to make the needed connection between chaplain and inmate.

“Many African-American inmates have not had vast exposure to Muslims from other countries and cultures. Many of the inmates come from urban communities and they attend masjids that are mainly comprised of African-Americans,” Chaplain Adib explains. “For example, African-American inmates may have a difficult time understanding English spoken with an Arabic or Pakistani accent, resulting in them not fully understanding the *khutbahs* [sermons] or Islamic studies classes.” Further, stereotypes and cultural interpretations of Islamic practice have the potential of causing a rift

between inmates and the Muslim chaplain who is not familiar with African-Americans or urban culture.

Chaplain Adib also stresses that it is a “must” for administrators and chaplain supervisors to “study the basic fundamentals of Islam from authentic sources, not from non-Muslim sources.” The chaplain supervisor should ensure that the Muslim chaplain facilitates the trainings needed to educate the staff and other non-Muslim chaplains.

#### MUSLIM CHAPLAINCY AS A WORK IN PROGRESS

Clearly, much work remains. An Internet search of the phrase “Muslim chaplain” reveals that the profession is still in its infancy. There are few sources available to guide and support the new Muslim chaplain. Supervisors can help to fill this void by gaining awareness of the issues that have the potential to stress and discourage a new Muslim chaplain.

The voices of the Muslim chaplains from the first wave are worth listening to; they have much to teach both new Muslim chaplains and those who supervise them. From shattering stereotypes to bridging cultural differences, Muslim chaplains are obliged to carry heavy social responsibilities beyond those borne by chaplains of other faiths.

The recommendations of those Muslim chaplains who have been serving and who are still around should be included in training programs for all new chaplains. Supervisors should encourage Muslim chaplains to participate in continuing education. They should also encourage them to attend retreats and chaplaincy conferences so that Muslim chaplains can network and nurture mentoring relationships with their colleagues.

Professional Muslim chaplaincy is a work in progress. Yet many of our Muslim brothers and sisters who walked through the doors of this vocation early have already learned to rely upon the very qualities that are further developed through clinical pastoral education: intuition, life experience, a soft heart, and a desire to serve Allah. These have long been the most valuable skills in a Muslim chaplain’s toolbox. New Muslim chaplains and their supervisors are blessed to be able to benefit from the legacy of the first wave.