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Celene Ibrahim

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# Spiritual Care by and for Muslim Women in the United States

Celene Ibrahim

Faculty, Religious Studies and Philosophy, Groton School, Groton, MA, USA

## ABSTRACT

Women's spiritual care networks are keeping the Islamic intellectual heritage fresh and intelligible for new generations of U.S.-based Muslims who are navigating faith, practices, and values as religious minorities. Here, I highlight leading voices and promising directions in the professionalization of Muslim women's spiritual caregiving. I detail how campus chaplaincy and seminary teaching positions have become vibrant settings for context-relevant guidance and spiritual mentorship among women.

## KEYWORDS

Campus chaplains; Islamic spiritual care; Muslim women; Muslim theological education; Muslims in the United States; religious leadership

## Introduction

As a Muslim scholar and chaplain, I regularly receive questions from women across the globe seeking context-informed, practical guidance. A sample of recent inquiries across my social media demonstrates some of the pressing issues from women seeking insights on how to live out their faith, values, and womanhood:

From a friend in Massachusetts: *Can I protect the civil liberties of all people in a pluralistic society while upholding the mainstream religious position prohibiting same-sex marriage?*

From a colleague in London undergoing cancer treatment: *Is God punishing me?*

From an acquaintance in Nigeria with a U.S.-based daughter: *I think my daughter is experiencing a breakdown, in part, from the pressures of internalized and externalized racism. What can I do to support her?*

From a stranger in Baghdad: *How do I balance the demands of my MBA program with the pressures on me to perform more traditional women's roles?*

From a former student living in New York City: *My friend's dog just came into my apartment and licked my whole carpet. How do I make it ritually pure?*

From a longtime mentee in Chicago: *When should I tell my employer that I'm pregnant?*

From a stranger in Kuwait: *Should I put my children in an Islamic school with weaker secular academics or an international school where they will miss out on solid Islamic education?*

And the recurrent question: *Do you know of any good Muslim men looking for marriage ... ?*

Addressing such regular, context-dependent, practical questions takes great care. In order to meet the vast demand for guidance and mentorship, those of us in spiritual caretaking roles are having to foster networks, novel platforms, and new modalities.

'Hermione Granger and the Boys Who Tried to Hold Her Back,' for instance, is the title of a recent online mini-course offered by scholar and educator Dr. Tamara Gray, the Executive Director and Chief Spirituality Officer at Rabata Inc. (est. 2014), a Minnesota-based non-profit with a transnational reach 'dedicated to building spiritual ties between women, the spiritual upbringing of women by women, and the establishment of the female voice in scholarship.'<sup>1</sup> At Rabata, women's recitations of the Qur'an echo off the walls of the virtual Zoom-mosque, connecting women across the United States with one another and with their sacred traditions. Rabata's teen program offers classes in 'adulthood' that encourage critical thinking, communication skills, confidence, and self-esteem. The extensive Rabata network, perhaps the largest US-based institute for women's traditional Islamic learning, includes dozens of women teachers from across the United States who specialize in different aspects of Islamic sacred knowledge.

Since its inception – and well before the global pandemic – Rabata was leveraging online educational platforms and social networks, combined with in-person events and retreats, to support women on journeys of spiritual and character refinement. Dr. Gray, Rabata's founder, taught women in Syria for decades before moving back to the United States to continue fostering Muslim women's spiritual networks. She mentors hundreds of students in the Rabata network and is a featured teacher on multiple forums for traditional religious learning. In online seminars, she skillfully fields questions ranging from parenting dilemmas to issues of work-life balance, to questions on Islamic theology and ritual. The Rabata umbrella now also includes Daybreak Press, a publisher for spiritual care literature for Muslim women, among other genres. Initiatives like Rabata are keeping the Islamic intellectual heritage fresh and intelligible as new generations of U.S.-based Muslims navigate their faith as a small and often stigmatized minority. Such institutions for religious teaching, pastoral discourses, and ritualized caregiving meld traditional practices and discourses with context-relevant pastoral guidance. With their emphasis on knowledge acquisition and woman-to-woman connection, these settings become particularly important sites of spiritual mentoring, caregiving, and character refinement.

Muslim women are a small but dynamic subset of the US population. Recent Pew Research Center data on Muslims in the United States estimates numbers at a conservative 3.45 million, with four of every five Muslim Americans being U.S. citizens.<sup>2</sup> About half are naturalized citizens from dozens of countries around the world. U.S.-based Muslims have a median age of 35, skewing a dozen years younger than the general U.S. public. The adult population of Muslim American women could be estimated at well over a million, and the population of Muslim girls in the United States could be reasonably estimated at about a half-million. U.S.-based Muslims are the most educated Muslim population in the world, measured by Pew in terms of years of schooling.

Given this young and relatively learned demographic, and given the steadily expanding list of U.S. campuses that currently host a Muslim chaplain, campus chaplaincy positions are a particularly vibrant professional settings wherein women scholars and spiritual caregivers are playing ever more institutionally visible roles.<sup>3</sup> Chaplain Ailya Vajid, for instance, graduated from Harvard Divinity School, pursued traditional

Islamic studies in Syria, Yemen, and other locales, and has served as Muslim Chaplain at the University of Virginia and on several other campuses. One of only a few female Muslim chaplains in the U.S., her role enables her to mentor others at crucial junctures in their young adult lives.<sup>4</sup> In our conversations, she reflected on the ‘depth and beauty of the bond between sisters and the ease and comfort that accompanies care for women by women.’ She lamented that ‘often women do not have access to spiritual support and care,’ and that ‘being a vessel for this care is a unique blessing.’<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Chaplain Nora Zaki, the Advisor for Muslim Student Life at both Vassar College and Bard College, trained in an M.Div. program at the University of Chicago, traveled extensively around the world to pursue studies in traditional Islamic sciences, and completed clinical pastoral education in healthcare.<sup>6</sup> She pointed out how young women who have access to a female mentor are able to experience forms of spiritual intimacy that are not as readily established with male scholars, due to traditional boundaries for decorum across sexes. Especially as young women make important decisions about career, relationships, and life goals more broadly, she explains, having a woman spiritual guide is critical for spiritual development and well-being. Amira Quraishi, College Chaplain and Muslim Life Coordinator at Wellesley College, also observes: ‘There is and always will be a limit to how effectively a man can provide spiritual care to a woman, for a man has no idea what it is really like to live, think, and feel as a Muslim woman does.’ She describes an essential message pertaining to self-compassion running through her approach to spiritual caregiving for Wellesley’s accomplished and ambitious young women:

I want my students to learn from me that Islam is a path of self-correction with self-compassion. It is a religion that, at its core, is the relationship between human and the Divine “Allah,” who is the Infinitely Compassionate (*al-Rahmān*), the Intimately Compassionate (*al-Rahīm*). The Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) was sent as compassion (*rahma*) for all the worlds and is a model who offers love and encouragement as we struggle to find our better selves.

The message to embrace self-compassion, particularly during periods of struggle, is resonant for young adult women who are coming into their own voices, identities, and aspirations, many as women of color in a society wherein whiteness is readily deemed normative; a society wherein Muslimness is a misunderstood – and even despised – identity; and a society wherein women continue to face significant hurdles on the path toward personal and professional fulfillment.

At campuses around the country, the Muslim Students Association (MSA) is often driven by young women keen on asserting their visions for social justice and capacities for communal stewardship. Dynamics related to identity are frequently the impetus for young women to seek mentorship, and in particular, gendered communal dynamics can be confusing or frustrating for those young adult women whose frames of reference for leadership in non-religious domains may be more explicitly egalitarian. Chaplain Nora Zaki at Vassar and Bard notes that on her campuses Friday congregational sermons – even those composed by her or by a woman student – are delivered by a man. This is a common arrangement across most U.S. campuses with a few notable exceptions. Work-arounds to the contentious issue of women delivering official Friday sermons do exist; a woman could give a talk at any time and just not explicitly structure it as a traditional Friday sermon, for instance. And women have – since the inception of the religion –

served as teachers and scholarly authorities.<sup>7</sup> Still, there have been a few functions, such as leading mixed-gender prayer, that women generally do not fulfill in many Muslim communities due to formalized prohibitions in religious jurisprudence.<sup>8</sup>

New terminology is being used to describe Muslim women scholars and caregivers, and titles can simultaneously open up and complicate religious authority for women.<sup>9</sup> For instance, some women are beginning to use the title *imāma* for designating a woman imam. The title ‘imama’ for women may hold little-to-no currency amongst traditionalist Muslims who would be more accustomed to men in the functional position of prayer leader and might oppose women leading even other women in prayer. The role and title of ‘chaplain’ – with its historically Christian connotation – offers women who hold such roles a status akin to clergy, therein opening new professional horizons for women religious leaders and conferring wider legitimacy. At the same time, such chaplaincy roles are primarily available within secular or otherwise non-Muslim institutions. How ready are U.S. Muslim institutions for women clergy-like figures? Many would say that more robust and visible women’s leadership is dreadfully overdue; some would say (and have said to me) that westernized feminism has begun to corrupt the aspirations of women causing them to seek out men’s religious roles and to neglect their primary roles as homemakers. Despite some resistance, the trend of women taking on professional leadership and spiritual care positions in non-Muslim institutions means that more women have the practical skills necessary to support U.S.-based Muslim community organizations too.

Seminary teaching faculty are another niche setting for women religious scholars to offer spiritual and pastoral guidance, and this area has grown substantially in the past decade. In Knoxville, Tennessee, faculty member Ustādha Zaynab Ansari of Tayseer Seminary<sup>10</sup> (est. 2012) infuses her academic instruction with moments for spiritual formation:

I’ve come to realize that so much of our relationship with God is mediated through our feelings about ourselves, our relationships, and our lot in life. So, when I teach about the life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the first generations of Muslims, I want my students to experience the full humanity of these individuals, including how they dealt with challenges to their faith and the experiences that nearly knocked them down. I invite my students to learn our [Muslim] history, not just as a collection of dates, places, and facts, but as a wellspring for self-understanding. Even if it’s a course covering Islamic history, I’m working with students at the intersections of the spiritual, emotional, and theological.

Tayseer Seminary is one of several burgeoning Islamic higher educational centers for training aspiring religious leaders that have been established in the last decade in the United States, and the Seminary hosts a number of women students.<sup>11</sup> In her teaching and caregiving as a faculty member and ‘female resident scholar,’ Ustādha Zaynab Ansari draws upon years of classical Islamic learning, combined with academic training in history and Middle Eastern Studies from Georgia State University. Ustādha Zaynab Ansari’s teaching is in demand across the United States on a range of community platforms that reach thousands of Muslim seekers of Islamic knowledge. Similarly, Dr. Feryal Salem, Associate Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies and Director of the Master of Divinity in Islamic Studies and Muslim Chaplaincy Program at American Islamic College in Chicago, a former co-director of the Islamic Chaplaincy Program at Hartford Seminary, has many years of experience training individuals for chaplaincy and spiritual

care work. In our conversations, she emphasized the importance of training women for spiritual care positions:

Muslim Chaplaincy is a field in which women are sorely needed to fulfill roles of spiritual care; in private settings, Muslim women often feel more comfortable confiding in other women. The balanced representation of women in the field of Muslim Chaplaincy also ensures that the needs and concerns of women are prioritized. Women make up half of the Muslim community, and yet they often take on the bulk of the responsibility in grass-roots community leadership through roles as teachers, educators, social service workers, and caretakers.

As Dr. Salem observes, after volunteer experience garnered in communal settings, individuals may even enroll in formal pastoral care training programs. Frequently these women spiritual caregivers maintain careers in other sectors that provide more dependable sources of income. Women's spiritual caregiving may continue to be relegated primarily to the domain of volunteerism and niche entrepreneurial initiatives for the foreseeable future, but gradually, mosques in the United States will likely realize the benefits of having a professional woman scholar and spiritual caregiver on staff.

Whether caregivers are volunteers providing informal mentorship and spiritual care, or whether they are religious professionals in chaplaincy and teaching roles – women with pastoral care skills are in demand. They may be entrepreneurial and found their own organizations, like Dr. Tamara Gray of Rabata, or like Dr. Kameelah Rashad, clinical psychologist and founder and President of the Muslim Wellness foundations, or like Najiba Akbar, Northeastern University's Muslim Spiritual Life Advisor, who also has an independent practice combining her training in social work with her experience as a life coach and Enneagram consultant. The extent to which demonstrated spiritual care needs will evolve into more plentiful staff positions for women spiritual caregivers in Muslim institutions remains to be seen, but the exigent needs of Muslim communities – and the inability of men religious leaders alone to fulfill demand – are clear. We might, for instance, anticipate more 'resident scholar' positions designated for women teachers and spiritual caregivers, especially if Muslim women philanthropists or other funders can recognize this arena as a key sphere of communal development.

How women seek out spiritual care and exercise religious authority is highly contextual and idiosyncratic. Like leading women professionals across sectors, sometimes women spiritual caregivers have had to withstand skepticism or attempts at delegitimization and have struggled to meet the exigent demand for mentorship of other women. We may not have fast-fixes for the challenges of life and the conundrums of living out a centuries-old tradition in a contemporary society that often finds our forms of piety unintelligible; we may have to be entrepreneurs and path-setters as professionals; and we may or may not have a rolodex of potential good-husband-prospects to recommend. Yet, we can continue conveying some of the essences of spiritual care – that life's struggles are opportunities for spiritual growth, that we can be sustained and nourished by forces beyond ourselves, and that self-compassion and self-knowledge are a foundation for abiding spirituality.

## Notes

1. "Philosophy," Rabata Inc.

2. Mohamed, et al., “U.S. Muslims Concerned About Their Place in Society.” Based on this data, the Muslim American population is concentrated primarily in a dozen states, including Illinois (at three per thousand), followed by Virginia, New York, New Jersey, Texas, Michigan, Florida, Delaware, California, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Georgia.
3. For an account of the changing roles of campus chaplains, see Ibrahim, Aeschlimann, and Kreimer, “Campus Chaplains Hold the Center When Things Fall Apart,” 52–62.
4. For an overview of Muslim chaplaincy in the United States, see Gilliat-Ray, Ali, and Pattison, eds., *Understanding Muslim Chaplaincy*, 145–65, esp. 161–3 on higher education.
5. Conversations relayed this paper are from social media and email correspondences with colleagues in the fall of 2020 and are presented here with their consent and review. My inquiry into Muslim women’s religious authority is supported in part by the Center for Islam in the Contemporary World (CICW) at Shenandoah University.
6. For a reflection by Nora Zaki on offering pastoral care as a Muslim in an interfaith hospital setting, see Zaki, “Intimate Strangers,” 149–51.
7. For a detailed account of the developments in Muslim women’s religious authority in the United States, see Hammer, *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism*.
8. For an extensive critical engagement with early jurisprudence related to women’s religious leadership, see Jalajel, *Women and Leadership in Islamic Law*.
9. For a discussion of the development of these new roles, see Jalalzai, “Muslim Chaplaincy and Female Religious Authority in North America,” 209–21.
10. *Ustādh* (m.) and *ustādha* (f.) are Arabic honorifics for a teacher or professor.
11. For an overview of such programs, see Ibrahim and Khalil, “From the Madrasa to the Seminary.”

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Celene Ibrahim* is the author of *Women and Gender in the Qur’an* (Oxford University Press, 2020) and the editor of *One Nation, Indivisible: Seeking Liberty and Justice from the Pulpit to the Streets* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2019). Ibrahim’s current book project explores the concept of monotheism in Islam and is forthcoming from Cambridge University Press. She holds a doctorate from Brandeis University, a Master of Divinity from Harvard University, and a bachelor’s degree from Princeton University. She serves as Muslim chaplain and as a faculty member in Religious Studies and Philosophy at Groton School where she offers courses on global religious history, Islamic and Arabic studies, women’s studies, and applied ethics. Ibrahim is one of the founding affiliate faculty members of the Boston Islamic Seminary.

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