

Dr Mahshid Turner

Reading the Signs: A Model for Muslim Chaplaincy

This paper proposes a theologically grounded model for Muslim chaplaincy, rooted in the Qur'anic concepts of *fitrah*, the primordial covenant (*alast*), and the Divine Names and Attributes (*al-Asmā' al-Ḥusnā*). Central to this framework is the Qur'anic narrative of Adam, to whom God taught “all the Names” (Q 2:31), a moment understood in Islamic theology not merely as the bestowal of linguistic knowledge, but as the conferral of a unique human capacity to recognize, reflect, and consciously manifest Divine qualities. By extension, all human beings - descendants of Adam - participated in the primordial covenant in which they bore witness to God's lordship and accepted the Trust (*amāna*) of moral responsibility, free will, and conscious attestation to the Divine through their lives.

Although human beings possess an innate disposition (*fitrah*) oriented toward truth, beauty, justice, compassion, and order, the Qur'an also acknowledges human vulnerability to forgetfulness, distraction, and moral disorientation. As a result, the Divine Names remain present within human experience, yet are often manifested unconsciously or obscured by the pressures of worldly life. This tension between innate spiritual knowledge and lived fragmentation forms a critical entry point for Muslim pastoral care. The chapter argues that chaplains may draw upon this shared primordial endowment to engage individuals in ways that affirm dignity, restore meaning, and facilitate moral and emotional healing.

Building upon the Abrahamic model of “reading the signs” (*āyāt*), this chapter presents a pastoral approach that encourages individuals to reflect upon life events, relationships, suffering, and moments of beauty as potential sites of Divine communication. Because knowledge of attributes such as mercy (*rahma*), beauty (*jamāl*), justice (*ʿadl*), wisdom (*ḥikma*), and compassion are embedded within the human constitution, this method is applicable within diverse and pluralistic contexts, including encounters with those of other faiths or no formal religious affiliation. Rather than imposing doctrine, the chaplain accompanies individuals in discerning how these attributes are already present, sought after, or distorted within their lived experience.

By articulating a chaplaincy model grounded in the Names and Attributes of Allah, this chapter contributes a distinctly Islamic pastoral theology that integrates spiritual anthropology, ethical reflection, and practical caregiving. It positions Muslim chaplaincy as an accompaniment toward wholeness, grounded in humanity's shared covenantal memory and enduring capacity to bear witness to the Divine through conscious living.



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Dr Mahshid Turner is the Muslim Chaplain at Durham University and an independent researcher and lecturer. She is the first female Muslim chaplain to be appointed in higher education in the UK. Dr Turner holds multiple degrees across various disciplines, including a Master's in Public Health, a Master's in Muslim Chaplaincy, Counselling and Pastoral Care, and a PhD in Muslim Theology.

Throughout her career, she has led numerous community projects, particularly supporting minority ethnic groups, and has held positions such as SEWA Project Officer for Age Concern's Minority Ethnic Community and Community Health Specialist for Sure Start. She currently serves as one of the co-chairs of Durham University's BAME Network.

In addition to her chaplaincy work at the university, Dr Turner is the Head of Education and Outreach for the International Foundation for Muslim Theology, where she delivers lectures, organises conferences, and runs workshops. Her work integrates academic scholarship, pastoral care, and community engagement, fostering dialogue, spiritual reflection, and educational development.