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Empathy as Ethical Discipline: Chaplaincy and Caring Co-Existence in Plural Contexts

In recent public, political, and even theological debates, empathy has increasingly been cast as a weakness - an emotional excess said to undermine responsibility, rational judgment, and the setting of appropriate boundaries. Such critiques, emerging most prominently in the United States and within the MAGA movement, though not confined to it, present a significant challenge to chaplaincy and care practices. These fields are fundamentally relational and depend upon empathetic engagement as a core personal and professional competence. In response, this paper reframes empathy not as sentimentality, but as a disciplined ethical practice that is essential to humane and responsible care.

The paper draws on the concept of caring coexistence, developed through interreligious engagement and societal reflection, and brings it into conversation with chaplaincy and spiritual care. Caring co-existence is not seen as passive tolerance, but as an active, relational commitment to the dignity, vulnerability, and wellbeing of others - across religious, cultural, and worldview differences. Within this framework, empathy is not boundaryless identification with the other, but a form of attentive responsibility that acknowledges difference, disagreement, and asymmetry without dehumanization. From an Islamic practical-theological perspective, empathy resonates with concepts such as *rahma* (merciful presence), *rifq* (kindness) and *khidmah* (service), a responsibility towards humanity, highlighting that care-oriented empathy is deeply rooted in religious ethical traditions.

Empirically, the paper is informed by qualitative research with hospitalized Muslim patients during the COVID-19 pandemic and by chaplaincy experience in healthcare and prison settings. Patients' narratives reveal that experiences of care were deeply shaped by whether they encountered empathetic presence from healthcare professionals and chaplains. Small acts of recognition - being listened to, taken seriously, and met as a whole person - significantly influenced patients' wellbeing and satisfaction. Conversely, the absence of empathy intensified suffering and alienation, even when clinical care was technically adequate.

The paper argues that empathy is not the opposite of responsibility or professional judgment, but its ethical foundation. For chaplaincy and care practitioners working in plural and often polarized contexts, caring co-existence offers a robust framework for sustaining empathetic care without naivety- affirming empathy as a demanding, necessary discipline at the heart of contemporary spiritual care.



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Naveed Baig is a Danish-Muslim scholar and PhD researcher, known for his work in Islamic studies, chaplaincy, and interreligious dialogue. He was born and raised in Denmark to parents of Pakistani origin and received his early education in Islamic theology in Islamabad, Pakistan. He furthered his education in the United Kingdom with a chaplaincy certificate from the Markfield Institute of Higher Education in Leicester and later completed a master's degree in pastoral care at the University of Copenhagen.

Professionally, Baig has - from 2005 to 2020 - served as Muslim hospital chaplain and coordinator for the Ethnic Resource Team at hospitals in Copenhagen. Presently he is a guest researcher at the University of Oslo, Faculty of Theology, from where he also holds his PhD. His research focuses on Muslim chaplaincy, spiritual care, and the role of religion and spirituality among Muslim patients in Nordic healthcare settings.

In 2023, Baig was listed in the Danish 'Who's who' (Kraks Blå Bog), a prestigious biographical reference work.