

Muslim Spiritual Care in Swiss Prisons: Towards Sustainable Institutional Recognition

Dr. Mohamad Khir Alwazir

University of Fribourg – CAS *Muslim Spiritual Accompaniment in Public Institutions*
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Abstract

This article analyzes the practices, challenges, and prospects of Muslim chaplaincy in Swiss prisons. Based on qualitative interviews conducted with an experienced Muslim chaplain and a former inmate, it highlights the spiritual and humanitarian contributions of this presence, as well as the structural obstacles it faces: lack of official status, institutional mistrust, and confessional inequalities. The study concludes that the institutional recognition of Muslim chaplaincy represents a necessary step to ensure equal treatment and strengthen social cohesion within penitentiary institutions.

Keywords: Muslim chaplaincy; prisons; Switzerland; religious pluralism; secularism; spiritual care; reintegration.

1. Introduction

Spiritual care is a fundamental right in detention, enshrined in the freedom of religion and conscience. However, in Switzerland, Muslim chaplaincy remains weakly institutionalized despite the significant proportion of inmates identifying as Muslim.

This research aims to:

1. Describe the role of the Muslim chaplain in prison;
2. Identify the challenges encountered;
3. Examine the prospects for sustainable institutionalization.

The analysis is based on two semi-structured interviews and forms part of the broader movement toward the professionalization of interreligious chaplaincy promoted by the *Centre Suisse Islam et Société* (CSIS).

2. Contextual Framework: Religious Pluralism and the Swiss Penitentiary System



Switzerland is experiencing a rapid diversification of its religious landscape (Stolz et al., 2016). Islam, the country's third-largest faith, is particularly represented in prisons – up to 50 percent of inmates in Geneva. Yet the implementation of the right to spiritual assistance remains unequal: only Catholic and Protestant chaplains hold official mandates, while imams often intervene on a voluntary basis. This disparity creates unequal access that runs counter to the spirit of the *European Prison Rules* (Conseil de l'Europe, 2020). The decentralized cantonal system explains this variability. Geneva, faithful to its secular tradition, funds no religious service, whereas other cantons officially recognize historical Churches and remunerate their chaplains. In this context, Muslim chaplains must contend with the precariousness of their status and the lack of institutional integration.

3. Methodology

An exploratory qualitative approach was chosen to understand lived experiences. Two participants were selected:

- **M.Y**, a Muslim chaplain active for more than twenty years in French-speaking Switzerland;
- **M.X**, a former Syrian detainee who served two years in prison.

Each 60-minute interview was analyzed using the thematic method of Braun & Clarke (2006, 2022). Four main themes emerged: (1) the role of chaplaincy; (2) institutional obstacles; (3) the experience of Ramadan; (4) future prospects.

4. Results

4.1. Chaplaincy as a Space of Humanity

For inmates, the chaplain represents “the only person they can talk to without fear.” His presence restores meaning and dignity, helps manage guilt, and fosters constructive spiritual development. The chaplain fulfills several functions: confidential listening, religious guidance (prayers, fasting), cultural mediation, and prevention of tensions. This presence humanizes punishment and helps maintain a peaceful atmosphere.

4.2. Structural Obstacles

- **Lack of status and resources:** limited interventions, volunteer work, symbolic compensation.
- **Partial integration:** no access to staff meetings, logistical dependence, no office.
- **Security mistrust:** suspicion of proselytism, limited understanding of the imam's role.
- **Diversity among Muslim inmates:** constant adaptation required to a wide range of profiles (converted, non-practicing, psychologically fragile).

These constraints limit the scope of pastoral action and generate a feeling of religious exclusion among Muslim detainees.



4.3. Ramadan Behind Bars

Fasting represents a strong spiritual marker yet is difficult to observe: no collective meals, isolation, and time constraints. The chaplain negotiates arrangements (distribution of dates, halal menus) but faces security regulations. Despite these challenges, Ramadan becomes a moment of solidarity among inmates, strengthening community cohesion.

4.4. Towards Institutional Recognition

Both interlocutors advocate for:

- the creation of paid positions for Muslim chaplains;
- professionalization through certified training;
- integration into interreligious teams.

The Geneva example and the Zurich model illustrate positive developments: service mandates, collaboration with the Churches, and shared supervision.

5. Discussion

The results confirm the analyses of Schneuwly Purdie (2024) and Arsever (2015): Muslim chaplaincy, though invaluable, remains under-institutionalized.

The absence of recognition produces inequality contrary to the principles of neutrality and equal treatment. Conversely, pilot cantonal experiences (Zurich, Vaud, Geneva) demonstrate that interreligious cooperation and academic training foster harmonious integration.

Professionalization also addresses security concerns: a trained and recognized imam serves as a cultural mediator and a factor of prevention, not radicalization. Finally, chaplaincy supports reintegration – restoring trust, moral awareness, and personal responsibility, all essential to rehabilitation (Schneuwly Purdie & Zurbuchen, 2021).

6. Recommendations

1. **Cantonal institutionalization:** creation of funded positions integrated into chaplaincy services.
2. **Continuous training:** generalize the CSIS CAS and develop modules specific to the prison environment.
3. **Interreligious collaboration:** mixed teams, joint supervision, and exchange of practices.
4. **Public communication:** promote chaplaincy as a public-interest service beyond confessional boundaries.
5. **Evaluative research:** measure the impact on detainees' well-being and reintegration.



7. Conclusion

Muslim chaplaincy in Swiss prisons embodies a lever for humanization and cohesion. Its institutional recognition is not a religious privilege but a requirement of equality and human dignity. By integrating trained imams within multidisciplinary teams, Switzerland would strengthen an inclusive model of secularism – faithful to its democratic values and attentive to the spiritual plurality of its prison population.

“Without chaplaincy, prison crushes your soul; with it, you remember that you are still human.” —
Former Muslim inmate

8. Link with the Triple Nexus: Humanitarian – Development – Peace

Muslim chaplaincy naturally fits within the logic of the **Triple Nexus**, which connects **humanitarian assistance**, **sustainable development**, and **peacebuilding**.

In the prison context, these three dimensions converge:

- **Humanitarian**, because spiritual accompaniment meets basic needs for dignity, listening, and psychological comfort.
- **Development**, because it promotes personal reconstruction, social reintegration, and the ethical rehabilitation of the inmate.
- **Peace**, because it contributes to violence prevention, non-conflictual management of religious differences, and the promotion of coexistence.

Thus, chaplaincy acts as a **bridge between justice, compassion, and reintegration**, strengthening the resilience of both individuals and institutions.

In this perspective, recognizing Muslim chaplaincy goes beyond freedom of religion: it becomes a **strategy of social cohesion** consistent with the principles of the Triple Nexus applied to the Swiss penitentiary system.

It supports the transition from a punitive logic to a restorative and inclusive one, placing human dignity at the heart of the correctional process and consolidating social peace.

Références principales

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