

## **Names of God: Practical Theology for Muslim Chaplains in CPE**

**Mumina Kowalski**

Clinical pastoral education is a standard requirement in the training of professional chaplains. This requirement has introduced Muslim chaplains to CPE programs, and they often enter these programs as the first Muslim student. The situation is challenging for students and supervisors alike: the students may find it difficult to find their way through this unfamiliar educational process, and their supervisors may find it difficult to understand Islamic teachings in order to train and assess these new students. Along with other challenges, Muslim chaplaincy students (like students from Christian and Jewish faith traditions) often struggle with how to give spiritual care to people from other religious traditions, while remaining authentic in their own beliefs and practices. Islamic history and spiritual tradition offer rich resources to guide them.

Increasingly, CPE programs provide a kind of intense and personal interreligious dialogue between seminary students of differing denominations.

---

Mumina Kowalski, coordinator, Islamic Chaplaincy Program, Hartford Seminary, 77 Sherman St., Hartford, CT 06105 (E-mail: mkowalski@hartsem.edu).

*Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry*

ations and faiths.<sup>1</sup> Coming to know and learn from one another through interreligious dialogue is an important locus for exploring future chaplains' religious and personal identities, especially with regard to giving and receiving peer feedback about attitudes on counseling "religious others."

#### "PEOPLE OF THE BOOK" AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

It is important to know that Islam overtly recognizes the existence and normal status of the "religious other." In explaining their positions on difference of religion, Muslims often rely on the theological model of "People of the Book," a distinct category of "religious others" encompassing members of scriptural traditions with certain transmitted ethical norms. Numerous verses evaluating "People of the Book" can be found in the Qur'an—some critical, others positive. For example, in *Surah Al-Ma'ida* (The Table Spread):

Say: "O People of the Book! you have no ground to stand upon unless you stand fast by the Law, the Gospel, and all the revelation that has come to you from your Lord." It is the revelation that comes to you from your Lord that increases in most of them their obstinate rebellion and blasphemy. But sorrow you not over (these) people without faith.

Those who believe (in the Qur'an), those who follow the Jewish (Scriptures), and the Sabians and the Christians, any who believe in God and the Last Day and work righteousness, on them shall be no fear nor shall they grieve.<sup>2</sup>

For a concrete example of normative interreligious relations, many Muslims will point to the treaty instituted by the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) in 622 CE, a document also referred to as the Constitution of Medina, which secured the rights of the Jews living in Medina to follow the laws of their own religion while under the protection of the Muslim community. This model of religious freedom established by the Prophet of Islam enabled later generations of Muslims to develop a civilization that could imagine and establish institutions where multiple faiths could function together while maintaining their own beliefs and laws.

In some respects this attitude finds modern echoes in interreligious chaplaincy in the hospital setting, where care is taken to provide the patient/client with non-discriminatory religious advocacy. In the words of Naomi Paget and Janet McCormack:

Health-care chaplaincy is conducted in a diverse and pluralistic setting where the "client" did not go to the institution with the specific need for

spiritual care. The patient is a captive audience, often unable to leave his or her bed and vulnerable due to the hospitalization circumstances.... Chaplains honor the "free exercise" clause of the First Amendment not only by refraining themselves from "evangelizing" but also by guarding against anyone else who might seek to proselytize or take undue advantage of a patient in a vulnerable position.<sup>3</sup>

Muslim chaplains might therefore understand themselves to be the spiritual protectors of their patients, following the Prophetic example.

A less well-known historic model, one that is particularly edifying for chaplains, lies in the hospitals established by the Abbasid caliphate (750–1257), during the first height of Muslim cultural glory. These were, in a sense, interfaith projects. Commissioned by Caliph al-Ma'mun, Christians and Hindus translated medical works from Greek and Sanskrit to Arabic as part of a huge translation movement, and the majority of the medical personnel working in the hospitals of Baghdad at that time were Nestorian Christians.<sup>4</sup> The Abbasid hospitals provide an illustration of how religious pluralism was not only tolerated in early Islamic civilization, but also utilized, producing sophisticated projects of mutual benefit.

#### "PEOPLE OF THE BOOK" AND OTHER RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

The theological model of "People of the Book," however, does not provide Muslim chaplains today with a plan of action beyond concepts of equal access, cooperation, and non-discrimination. It also brings certain key religious differences to the fore. Importantly, Islamic theology has no doctrine of Trinity or incarnation. In fact, the Qur'an expressly forbids this concept, critiquing its currency among the People of the Book.

People of the Book! Do not exceed the limits in your religion, and attribute to God nothing except the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was only a Messenger of God, and His command that He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in God and in His Messengers, and do not say: (God is a) trinity. Give up this assertion; it would be better for you. God is indeed just One God. Far be it from His Glory that He should have a son. To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and in the earth. God is sufficient for a guardian.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, common requests to the hospital chaplain may include prayer, baptism, the giving of sacraments, and other rites that Muslims do not share. Paget and McCormack remark, "Because of the emergency nature of much of health care, chaplains in this setting may be asked to perform services they

may otherwise not do from their own theological position or tradition. Any chaplain would be well served to have thought through possible scenarios and formed a plan before an emergency ministrations is requested. Muslim chaplains, too, need to think these matters through, and for this purpose theological concepts beyond "the People of the Book" are required.

The thinking process might begin with the sacredness of visitation. Attending to the sick, whoever they might be, is known by Muslims to have high spiritual value. An Islamic tradition records:

[God will say] "O son of Adam, I was sick but you did not visit Me." He [the person addressed] would say: O my Lord; how could I visit You whereas You are the Lord of the worlds?" Thereupon He (God Most High) would say: Didn't you know that such and such servant of Mine was sick but you did not visit him and were you not aware of this, that if you had visited him, you would have found Me by him?<sup>7</sup>

This *hadith qudsi*, or report of divine speech, goes on to call for other good works, such as feeding the poor; it indicates on one level that God wants believers to do good. But perhaps more significantly, this *hadith* emphasizes the inherent value of the charitable act to the one who acts on behalf of God, i.e., the one who visits the sick. According to this *hadith*, the one who visits the sick discovers the presence of God. The doctrinal correctness of the sick person is irrelevant in this context.

A strikingly similar concept is found in the writings of the preeminent Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274). According to Pim Valkenburg, "Aquinas' theological notion of the 'hidden presence of God' is a hermeneutic opening for discussion between Muslims and Christians on similarities in their understandings about God." Valkenburg's thesis on developing comparative theology for interreligious dialogue uses readings of Muslim texts, including the medieval Muhammad al-Ghazali (d. 1111) and the more modern Said Nursi (d. 1960), as helpful exercises for exploring Christian theology in new ways.<sup>8</sup> Muslim chaplains will draw the most profit from CPE's interreligious encounters when they have the broadest knowledge of their own theological heritage. How, after all, does a Muslim recognize the presence of God?

#### KNOWABILITY AND THE NAMES OF GOD

Widely varying theologies have evolved over the course of Islam's history, due in part to the absence of a central religious hierarchy. The common liturgy

of formal prayer and practice supplied by the Prophet maintained a reliable religious standard, but intellectual and philosophical diversity characterized the Muslim territories as they expanded. Comparative theological analysis and response, therefore, reached high development at an early stage.

The knowability of God soon surfaced as an important topic of debate. During the Abbasid era, and, after, the implications of Qu'ranic language and imagery were scrutinized in relation to Greek philosophy and other religious ideas. One major focus was the attributes of God as conveyed by the Qur'an, which were known as *asmâ Allâh al-husnâ*, "the Most Beautiful Names of God." In the classical Islamic study of the divine names, contemporary Muslim chaplains may perhaps find valuable hints for their ministry.

A famous report from the Prophet, attributed to his companion Abu Hurayra, enumerates ninety-nine "beautiful names" through which God may be known. (Many scholars since have suggested that the number of names for God is not limited to ninety-nine.)<sup>9</sup> These "beautiful names" refer to God in multiple ways. The traditional list describes God with ethical names (i.e., the Merciful, the Holy, the Truth) and with metaphysical names (i.e., the Judge, the King, the Creator). One way the names have often been classified is as either *jalâl*, "majestic," or *jamâl*, "beautiful." Another classification calls them *tanzih* or *tashbih*, often translated as "transcendent" and "immanent." In whatever manner the names are viewed, the human/divine relationship always lies at their heart.

Tanzih names are incomparable and unknowable. They "establish the greatness of God and the smallness of the human, or the reality of the Real and the unreality of the unreal. [They] situate people in their proper relationship with their Lord. [They] allow them to understand that they are servants of God, and that they must act like servants."<sup>10</sup>

Tashbih names, by contrast, are intimately familiar and close: these include names such as *al-Mujîb*, "the Responder to Prayer," or *al-Ghafûr*, "the Forgiver and Hider of Faults."<sup>11</sup> "To understand tashbih is to grasp God's nearness, sameness, immanence and accessibility."<sup>12</sup>

On the practical side, Muslims are encouraged to use these names for assistance and guidance. The Qur'an instructs: "Say: Call upon Allâh [God], or call upon *Rahmân* [the All-Compassionate]: By whatever name ye call upon Him, (it is well): For to Him belong the most beautiful names."<sup>16</sup> But how exactly are we to understand how to call upon God using these names? And since the primary doctrine of Islam holds that Allâh is One, how are we to

avoid anthropomorphism while understanding the names at all? The question of God's names, in any interpretation, points to the enduring paradox of unity in multiplicity.

#### A MORE PERSONAL AND PRACTICAL IMAGE OF GOD

Perhaps one of the best guides for Muslims wrestling with this question is the great medieval philosophical theologian and mystic Muhammad al-Ghazali (whom Valkenberg found provocative for Christians, too). Near the end of his life, Ghazali wrote a famous treatise on the ninety-nine names: *al-Maqsâd al-asnâ fî sharh asmâ Allâh al-husnâ*, "The Noblest of Aims in the Explanation of God's Most Beautiful Names." His work illustrates a balance of competing theologies that would be an important synthesis of scholarship for successive generations of Muslims.

Part of Ghazali's purpose was to take a clear position in the theological debates of his times. Yet after the book's initial polemics, al-Ghazali presents a more personal and practical image of God. He uses lessons and counsel to urge the reader to actively engage and reflect upon each of the divine names in order to acquire their qualities, as suggested by the Prophet's words, "You should be characterized by the characteristics of God Most High." In so doing, he bridges seemingly disparate worlds: faith and reason, belief and knowledge, beauty and truth. For example, in his explanation of the nineteenth name, *al-Fattâh*, "the Opener," al-Ghazali describes the name using verses from the Qur'an:

The Opener—is the one by whose providence whatever is closed is opened, and by whose guidance whatever is unclear is disclosed. At times He opens kingdoms for His prophets and removes them from the hands of His enemies, saying: *Lo! We have given thee [O Muhammad] a signal victory* (XLVIII: 1)<sup>14</sup>...and at other times He lifts the veils from the hearts of His holy men, opening to them the gates to the heavenly kingdoms and the beauties of His majesty. So He says: *That which Allah opens unto mankind of mercy, none can withhold it* (XXXV:2). Whoever has in his hands the keys to the invisible world and the keys to sustenance, it is proper that he be called an opener.<sup>15</sup>

Then al-Ghazali counsels to inspire:

Counsel: Man should yearn to reach a point where the locks to the divine mysteries are opened by his speech, and where he might facilitate by his knowledge what creatures find difficult in religious and worldly affairs, for him to gain a share in the name of Opener.<sup>16</sup>

Al-Ghazali makes a sympathetic companion for chaplains in part because of his life story: he began his famous quest for meaningful religious practice, as opposed to overdrawn abstract intellectual exercises, as the result of a life-crisis. Due to self-doubt, he radically altered his life as a successful professor at the height of his career in order to pursue a more spiritual goal. His subsequent adoption of a more mystical (Sufi) writing style came about after he left his academic position at Nizamiyyah College in Baghdad and traveled incognito for years to Damascus, Jerusalem, and Mecca. When he eventually returned, he used his former academic knowledge with a purer and more practical intention: to revive and balance his writings with a kind of pastoral appeal.

Ghazali's works had an enormous and lasting effect on later Islamic civilization mainly because they did not embrace a single orthodoxy, but recognized the validity of various Muslim theologies in coming to the best understandings of Islam as a way of life. In balancing his own approach to knowledge, he effectively promoted a stable synthesis among the legal, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of Islam that resonated with Muslims of his own time and continues to speak to us today.

#### IMMANENT SPIRITUALITY AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Muslims living in pluralistic societies today are challenged, as al-Ghazali was, to find balance between their understandings of Islam in theory and in practice. Muslim chaplains are under special pressure here and might be of special assistance. Older Islamic functionaries (scholars, imams, and *shaykhs*), among whom the labor of religion was formerly divided, may not now exist in all places, while new roles for religion exist in universities, hospitals, and other public institutions. And professional chaplaincy enables Muslims to participate beyond the boundaries of religious community in broad modern ethical conversations, such as those surrounding the complex issues created by modern medical science.

Meanwhile Muslim CPE students might profitably ask themselves: is the usefulness of the Islamic Divine Names limited to traditional forms suggested in past scholarship, or do the names lend themselves to supplication with non-Muslims?

In the final chapter of Sherman Jackson's 2005 book, *Islam and the Blackamerican*, the author proposes an "immanent spirituality" that may ap-

ply to the interreligious dialogue that Muslim chaplains use in their professional encounters with patients in the hospital. The primary focus of his theory of immanent spirituality "is on the human rather than the divine side of the religious equation. It is to affirm that spirituality can reside in the activity of 'walking with' as opposed to 'ascending to' God. Its locus is neither the convent or the mosque but the everyday trials and tribulations of human existence. It comes primarily of (1) perseverance in the face of hardship and disappointment, and (2) resisting the pressure to substitute the values and 'vision' of second creators for those of the First."<sup>17</sup>

Contemporary thinkers from various faith traditions are creatively exploring the boundaries of their faith traditions in order to find new ways of living with plurality as believers. Jewish philosopher and Talmudist Emmanuel Levinas proposes "a radical defense of the priority of the other as someone who summons me to take responsibility."<sup>18</sup> Feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson "refers to three insights...derived from Aquinas's theology: the doctrine of God's hiddenness or incomprehensibility, the play of analogy in speech about the divine, and the consequent need for many names of God."<sup>19</sup> Pim Valkenberg "wants to contribute to the future of interreligious dialogue between Christians and Muslims by presenting some exercises in Muslim-Christian theology."<sup>20</sup>

The tension between the desire to acknowledge the "religious other" and the need to remain faithful to one's own beliefs is shared with chaplains of all faith traditions. Ironically, examining the theologies of others in depth often leads to a clearer understanding of one's own faith. The history of Islamic theology is an example of this process: in the varied attempts to clarify major questions about God and the purpose of creation, Muslim scholars, philosophers, and mystics wrestled with internal and external ideas that compelled them to synthesize their understandings. Perhaps straddling theological boundaries through interreligious dialogue in fields like chaplaincy helps clarify worthwhile convergences, as well as distinguishing the defining differences between faiths.

#### NOTES

1. For additional information, visit the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education Inc., "Information for Prospective Students: Where Can One Enroll in CPE?" at <http://www.acpe.edu/faq.htm#faq10>.



2. Qur'an 5:68–69. A. Yusuf Ali, trans., *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an* (Beltsville, Md.: Amana Corporation, 2002).
3. Naomi Paget and Janet McCormack, *The Work Of The Chaplain* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Judson Press, 2006), 52–53.
4. Fazlur Rahman, *Health and Medicine in the Islamic Tradition* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 1989), 66.
5. Qur'an 4:171–172.
6. Rahman, *Health and Medicine*, 53.
7. *Ibid.*, 59.
8. Pim Valkenberg, *Sharing Lights On the Way to God: Muslim-Christian Dialogue and Theology in the Context of Abrahamic Partnership* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi: 2006), xvii.
9. Al-Ghazali, in his famous treatise on the names, devotes the third section of the treatise to the topic of the number. His conclusions are that the names exceed ninety-nine, that it is permissible to describe God by whatever may qualify Him—except if directly prohibited, and that the specific number of names given by God provide an advantage to knowing Him. Richard J. McCarthy, *Deliverance From Error: An Annotated Translation of al-Munqidh min al Dalal and Other Relevant Works of Al-Ghazal* (Louisville, Ky.: Fons Vitae, 1980).
10. Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (St. Paul, Minn.: Paragon House, 1994), 251.
11. Translations found in Tosun Bayrak al-Jerrahi al-Halveti, *Most Beautiful Names* (Putney, Vt.: Threshold Books, 1985).
12. Murata and Chittick, *Vision of Islam*, 251.
13. Qu'ran 17:110
14. The Arabic word for victory used in this verse also means “opening.”
15. David B. Burrell and Nazih Daher, trans., *Al-Ghazali, The Ninety-nine Beautiful Names of God* (Cambridge, Mass.: Islamic Texts Society, 1992), 79.
16. *Ibid.*, 79–80.
17. Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 184–185.
18. Valkenberg, *Sharing Lights*, xiii.
19. *Ibid.*, 214.
20. *Ibid.*, 162.