

Building bridges between theology and pastoral care

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Tell us one story from your religious tradition that relates to your pastoral care and represents the theology behind it.

Within the Muslim faith, many stories of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)¹ have been collected and recorded in hadith² literature. One story related to pastoral care mentions the Prophet visiting an old woman when she was ill.

One old woman made a habit of throwing rubbish on Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) whenever he passed from her house. Muhammad (peace be upon him) had to pass that house daily on the way to the mosque. Even when the old woman threw rubbish on him, he would pass silently without showing any anger or annoyance. This was a regular daily event.

One day when the Prophet was passing by the woman's house, she was not there to throw the rubbish. He obviously noticed and was pleased not to have rubbish thrown over him. The next day, he passed the old woman's house and again there was no one throwing rubbish so this time he stopped and asked the neighbour about her well-being. The neighbour informed the Prophet that the woman was sick in bed. The Prophet politely asked permission to visit the woman. When allowed he entered the house. The woman thought that he had come there to take his revenge at a time when she was unable to defend herself because of sickness. But the Prophet assured her that he had only come to her, not to take any revenge, but to visit her and to look after her needs, as it was the command of Allah (God) that if any one is sick, a Muslim should visit them and should help them if their help is needed.

The Theology behind this tradition

Through this narrative the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) has taught Muslims how to visit the sick. The act of visiting the sick within Islam should be offered to all. A Muslim should not differentiate between friend or foe when the individual is ill and is in need. On the topic of 'open to all', interestingly, in this narrative we find the Prophet is visiting a female whereas normally within the Muslim tradition passed on to us by the Prophet himself, there are quite strict restrictions and constraints about mixing with the opposite gender. The fact that this incident took place in the early part of Islam before the introduction of any laws on this subject was revealed may be one of the reasons. The other point is the woman was old, so the Muslim male may visit a female who is sick, but in light of other traditions, the age of the opposite gender will determine any laws around segregation. Informed

¹ Salutation said after mentioning any of the Prophets' name

² A saying, action, or indirect approval of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), however term is used sometimes in a much broader sense to cover the narrations about the Companions [of the Prophet] and Successors [to the Companions].

consent from the patient is a hot topic in the U.K. especially within the Chaplaincy field. We find in this narrative, consent and permission from the individual being visited is part of the etiquette of visiting the sick. Compassion is a quality found within all faiths and traditions. Here we see compassion for the sick, where although the Prophet was the victim of this individual on many occasions, the Prophet's compassion for humanity compelled him to visit this old woman. This is a quality which should be taken to the bedside by all who are visiting the sick.

Besides the above narrative there are many other traditions which influence the theology of pastoral care within the Muslim faith. They talk about how a visit should be short and not so long that it becomes a burden on the sick person, unless the individual requests one to stay longer. During the visit the words spoken should be carefully chosen and should offer support and hope to the individual. Other traditions mention specific prayers for the sick which should be read with or upon the sick.

What does a chaplain in your tradition represent?

The medical intervention is clearly encouraged within the Islamic tradition, but with the condition of not forgetting the ultimate source of cure, God. The Chaplain in the Muslim tradition represents the visiting of the sick by the Prophet, the spiritual master who reminded us all of the ultimate source. So, along with it being a duty within Islam to visit the sick, the Chaplain is there to nurture the soul. At times of illness, many feel lonely and despondent. They appreciate a gentle reminder of the meaning of their illness, a spiritual meaning without the medical jargon. Although this can come from anyone, family, friends, relatives, seeing and hearing it come from someone who they consider to be religious and spiritual offers them more comfort. The Chaplain's prayer is also very consoling, not only for the sick person but also for the relatives/carers. The Chaplain is also in a strange sort of way a reminder of the reality of this life in comparison to the afterlife. This is not to say, Muslim Chaplains are ghosts! It is about bringing a presence beyond that of the nurses and doctors, which reminds the sick person there is more to the illness and pain than what meets the eye and what the body can feel, that this pain and illness is temporary in comparison to the comforts of the afterlife. The Chaplain will try and facilitate for the individual to understand why God may have presented him with such a trial.

How does theology in your tradition influence the organisation of health care?

In the Muslim tradition, Chaplaincy has always been seen as a vocation for all Muslims. The Prophet's teachings around offering pastoral or specific religious care can be carried out by anyone as there are no exclusive actions which can only be carried out by a priest or minister. In the past, Muslims regarded it is a duty to visit the sick and offer pastoral and religious care. However, in an ever changing world where individual priorities have taken over collective responsibilities, a new tradition of Muslim Chaplaincy is evolving, a person from the faith, one who is well versed within Islam and who

carries within them a spiritual presence, specifically being employed to look after the pastoral, spiritual and religious needs of the sick. With the increase of materialism which in turn has decreased time people can give to others, this new tradition of Muslim Chaplaincy will only increase. In some countries Muslim Chaplaincy is more advanced than others, and many countries where there is a large Muslim community are learning from the experience of others and looking into ways of employing this new tradition within Islam.