



Black and Muslim: How Chaplains Can Empower Marginalized Students

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Abstract

Being Black and Muslim on college or university campuses poses both challenges and opportunities. It's one thing to be Black and Muslim on a campus such as Howard University or any of the other Historically Black College or Universities (HBCU) where everything associated with being Black is acknowledged, welcomed, celebrated, and embraced. However, it's too often a totally different experience being Black and Muslim on the campus of a predominantly white institution (PWI). Black Muslims at PWIs often experience microaggressions and oppression by other Muslim students, faculty, and staff. This paper offers researched strategies for chaplains and other academic professionals at predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) that can be a guide to help Black Muslim students find and assert their religious identity, feel comfortable as a welcomed member of Muslim organizations, events, and activities, and encourage their participation and leadership in the Muslim Students Association, all while helping them strengthen and affirm their faith.

Introduction

Halimah was so excited to go to the state university. Her parents had attended another state school and had told her wonderful stories of being in the Muslim Students Association (MSA), where they met their best friends. They told her about the exciting events and programs they attended as young Muslims trying to make their way in the world, the *halaqas*, the amazing guest speakers, and the trips to other schools to socialize as well as network with other young Muslims. Halimah wanted the same things. She was eager to get started, and with freshman enthusiasm, she went to the first MSA meeting of the semester. She was surprised to be one of only a few Black students there. She was even more surprised at the looks she received when she got there. Halimah chalked it up to being new and figured more Black students would attend later in the semester. That didn't happen. However, Halimah was undaunted. She came to every meeting, but by mid-semester realized her ideas and suggestions were always rejected. Maybe it

was just because she was a freshman, she thought. She kept coming and kept trying until, at one meeting, she suggested that at the next event they have something other than Desi (South Asian) or Middle Eastern food, have a more diverse menu. One of the other students responded with a snarl, “Do you want us to have bean pies?” “That’s not a bad idea,” she thought, but the message was clear. That was her last meeting with the MSA. She took her hurt feelings and started going to the Black Student Union meetings. There she was welcomed because of her race, but there were no activities related to her religion. She felt as if they tolerated her breaks for prayers, her requests for “Cheese pizza only, please,” and her hijab and modest attire. Halimah found herself at the intersection of race and religion, as do so many Black Muslim university students at predominantly white institutions (PWI).

Challenges of being Black and Muslim

The challenges of being Black and Muslim for many mean you are often too Black to be Muslim, and for others, you are too Muslim to be Black. When people talk about Blacks, they are rarely also talking about Black Muslims. When people talk about Muslims, they seldom include Black Muslims. America’s intense media campaign to stigmatize Muslims has also negatively impacted Black Muslims. Black Muslims face both racism and Islamophobia. This double burden becomes a triple burden for females who face sexism too. Dr. Sherman Jackson explains in *Islam and the Blackamerican* that Black Muslims must interpret everything through the lens and prism of the real and or imagined expectations of immigrant and overseas possessors of “true Islam.”¹ We all need to work to replace the intentional or unintentional marginalization of Black Muslims by being intentionally welcoming with “Salaams” in the various spaces in which they engage with other Muslims. Our Prophet ﷺ said, “Smiling in your brother’s face is an act of charity.”²

¹ Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), loc. 172–73, Kindle.

² *Jami’ al-Tirmidhi*: no. 1970, declared authentic by al-Albani.

The challenges of being Black and Muslim include often having to answer a series of questions that serve as a litmus test of their Islam. “Are you a convert? When did you convert? Are you in the Nation? Are you in the Imam's community? Tell me how you came to Islam.” Layla Abdullah-Poulos, founder of Native-Born American (NbA) Muslims, a blog on Patheos, addressed this issue in a 2018 Facebook post, “I am just done with immigrant/immigrant-descent Muslims having the audacity of thinking not only are they the authority on Islam but also the arrogance of thinking NbA Muslims (African American, Native American, Latino American, & European American) should ‘stand and deliver’ their deen by answering a bunch of asinine questions. ‘Are you on the Sunnah?’ ‘Do you know the prophets? Man, you and your dumb questions.” She expresses the frustration of countless Native-born American Muslims who feel they have to always prove themselves when confronted by someone who feels their “Islam” has more power or authenticity.

The challenge of being Black and Muslim is also prevalent in death. Have you heard of Abdisamad Sheikh-Hussein? This 15-year-old almost had his legs severed in 2014 when a man whom Kansas City locals said had been harassing the community with anti-Islamic taunts and violent threats swerved his car and plowed into the boy.³ Many called it a hate crime, but his death and the circumstances behind it didn't achieve national attention. Just another young Black man dead, his name added to the statistics. The following year in Chapel Hill, the horrific murder of Deah Barakat, Yusor and Razan Abu-Salha made international headlines. Muslims around the world knew their names. A year later, in 2016, three young Black men—two of whom were Muslim—were shot dead in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Noor Rostoum, president of the NYU MSA, was preparing to speak at a campus vigil. As he developed his remarks, he was approached by members of his community, asking why the MSA had chosen to mourn these lives.⁴ Do Black Muslim lives matter? If South Asian or Arab Muslims don't sanction the event, the

³ Joanna Walters, “Community Mourns Somali Muslim Teen's Death in Kansas City Hate Crime,” *The Guardian*, December 06, 2014,

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2014/dec/06/community-mourns-somali-muslim-death-in-kansas-city-hate>.

⁴ Omar Etman, “For Black Muslim Students, a Two-Pronged Fight for Solidarity,” PBS, August 13, 2016,

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/black-muslim-college-students-issue-call-allies>.

message being sent is that it must not be Islamic. This again speaks to an unspoken totem pole of priority within the Muslim community. Alaina Morgan, a lawyer and Ph.D. candidate at NYU studying the history of Black Muslims in the African diaspora, said there's a "hierarchy of authority and authenticity within Islam."⁵ "Even among African-Americans who converted to Islam, they have historically looked at the Middle East and North Africa as a source of authority," she said. "South Asian and Arab imams are looked at as more authentic."⁶ In that hierarchy of authority and authenticity, Blacks are nowhere to be found on the totem pole.

In life and death, Arab and South Asian Muslim lives seem to matter far more than the lives of Black Muslims.⁷ These values have financial consequences, as well. Deah's fundraiser for dental supplies for Syrian refugees went from \$20,000 before his death to \$380,000 after his death. In contrast, when Black Muslims are murdered, families struggle to pay the bills.⁸ When a Pittsburgh Synagogue was attacked in 2018, Muslim organizations raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for the victims and survivors. They raised none for the two Black people who were killed the same week in a Kentucky grocery store by a white man who first went to a Black church, but the doors were locked. He then went to the Kroger and shot Maurice Stallard and Vickie Lee Jones. Donna Auston, a Ph.D. Candidate, and Black Muslim, organized a fundraiser for them, raising \$50,000. Again, do Black lives matter? Do Black Muslim lives matter? Are they valuable? Apparently, many think not. Many behave as if Black Muslim lives do not matter. Life for Black Muslims is bifurcated into a war fought on two fronts: a battle with one's community to be seen and respected as well as a battle to resist targeted state and vigilante violence.⁹

The challenge of being Black and Muslim begins with the problem of just being Black in America. Dr. W. E. B. DuBois wrote about it at the turn of the century,

⁵ Etman, "Two-Pronged Fight."

⁶ Etman, "Two-Pronged Fight."

⁷ Khaled A. Beydoun, "The Colour of Muslim Mourning," Al Jazeera, February 15, 2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/02/colour-muslim-mourning-150215065825362.html>.

⁸ Beydoun, "Colour of Muslim Mourning."

⁹ Muna Mire, "Towards a Black Muslim Ontology of Resistance," *New Inquiry*, April 25, 2015, <https://thenewinquiry.com/towards-a-black-muslim-ontology-of-resistance/>.

“One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”¹⁰ Writer and activist James Baldwin said, “To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time.” When the Black man interacts with the broader Muslim community, he brings this conflicting sense of self with him. It may be better as a Muslim, and in some sense, it can get worse. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.¹¹ Black Muslims, in many ways, have exchanged a white oppressor (expressions of white supremacy) for an immigrant oppressor (the presumed source of “authentic Islam”) in the name of Allah. Black Muslims see themselves through the eyes of immigrant Muslims. It is a world they desperately want to be a part of but that, too many times, excludes them. Being a Black Muslim within American Muslim communities means learning to navigate the precarious intersection of two marginalized groups, simultaneously fighting for the respect of their Muslim peers and safety within a national system of violence.¹²

College and university chaplains have the unique and exceptional job of expressing our willingness as scholars to become a community that, however imperfectly, strives to create a welcoming, equitable, inclusive, and engaged academic climate.¹³ When Muslim students walk on our campus, they are accosted by Christian privilege. This privilege is defined as “the conscious and subconscious advantages often afforded to the Christian faith in America’s colleges and universities.”¹⁴ It is reflected in the university calendar and time off; food; holidays, celebration and worship; space; curriculum and language; the secularization of Christianity; and

¹⁰ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (New York: Pocket Books, 2005).

¹¹ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folks*.

¹² Etman, “Two-Pronged Fight.”

¹³ Lucy A. Forster-Smith, *College & University Chaplaincy in the 21st Century: A Multifaith Look at the Practice of Ministry on Campuses across America* (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths, 2013), loc. 87–89, Kindle.

¹⁴ Tricia Seifert, “Understanding Christian Privilege: Managing the Tensions of Spiritual Plurality,” *About Campus* 12, no. 2 (2007), 10–17, <https://doi.org/10.1002/abc.206>.

safety. Yoruba T. Mutakabbir and Tariqah A. Nurridin explain Muslim students may encounter:¹⁵

- a Eurocentric curriculum
- dietary limits (no pork, alcohol)
- a school calendar which may conflict with Muslim holidays
- lack of a physical prayer space on campus
- classes that conflict with prayer times
- threats/harassment/student intimidation.

How do chaplains make it easy for Muslim students to exist in this environment? When we serve Muslim students, we decry the unrighteousness of discrimination, racism, imperialism, privilege, and exclusivity that is found in the academy and the nation. We oversee human interaction by the young and inquisitive, the adventurous, the vulnerable, the wondering, the woke, the confused, the know-it-alls, the I-really-don't-know, and the you-fill-in-the-blank from your experiences. We aid those with faith crises, those who yearn for more meaning in their lives beyond a good job, house, and family, as well as those who hunger to know God and all that He can mean in their lives. We are a lamppost in a very dark alley for some and a warm, caring reminder for others. We have the privilege of working with young people making some of the most important decisions of their lives as college students, from determining their future careers to embracing their need to find their religious identity to discerning their deepest values and what Sharon Daloz Parks has called their “worthy dreams”: “an imagination of self as adult in a world that honors the potential of the young adult soul.”¹⁶ Supporting students, faculty, and staff during moments of personal and spiritual development has always been an explicit role of college chaplains. From cultural-immersion pilgrimages where chaplains accompany students through deeply transformational experiences to the daily work of reminding individuals and institutions of their higher calling, to responding with grace in moments of crisis, chaplains enrich the

¹⁵ Yoruba T. Mutakabbir and Tariqah A. Nuriddin, *Religious Minority Students in Higher Education* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

¹⁶ Forster-Smith, *College & University Chaplaincy*, loc. 161–64.

lives of their communities.¹⁷ I believe chaplains are best qualified and suited to assist Black Muslim students in their quests for acceptance, recognition, freedom, justice, and equality at PWIs. The following are my recommendations to help chaplains be successful in this effort.

Recommendations

1. Encourage students' spiritual development by inviting them to the campus dedicated prayer space that allows for the five daily prayers, Jummah, *halaqas*, workshops, Eid celebrations, Ramadan *iftars*, and more. Give them a personal invitation. In that space, invite Black guest speakers but *not just during Black History Month*. If you need a list of more-than-qualified *khateeb*s, I would be happy to share that with you. Jummah khutbahs at Howard University are 99% given by Black Imams. Also, do not have a Black History Month event and only have White speakers.

*Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives*¹⁸ explains that "spiritual growth enhances other college outcomes, such as academic performances, psychological well-being, leadership development and satisfaction with college." It's important to understand this as many students are struggling to find themselves, who they are away from their family, away from the structures of home. This becomes even more challenging when you are Black and Muslim and feel unwanted. Having Black *khateeb*s do Jummah and speak at other events empowers the Black students; representation matters. It also shows other students the value of Black imams and Islamic scholars. All of this will help students excel in other areas of campus life as well.

2. Establish an environment that allows students to create their own identity as Muslims and not just replicas of immigrant Muslims. Many are looking for something concrete and real, independent of stereotypes of Muslims seen in the

¹⁷ Forster-Smith, *College & University Chaplaincy*, loc. 167.

¹⁸ Alexander W. Astin, Helen S. Astin, and Jennifer A. Lindholm, *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011).

media. What does it mean to be Black and Muslim? What does it mean to be African and Muslim? What does it mean to be Caribbean and Muslim? What does it mean to be Afro Latino or Afro Latina and Muslim?

Christian Smith explains in *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*¹⁹ Three “dimensions” (or clusters of actions) a congregation might provide in engaging teenagers to grow spiritually and acquire valuable knowledge, abilities, and contacts include Moral Order, Learned Competencies, Social and Organizational Skills. For Black students, these three factors are essential for them but difficult to achieve if they feel isolated and marginalized from the larger group. There have to be both informal and formal invitations for these students to be a part of the group. Make real connections with students by talking to them individually. Check on them when you don’t see them at events. Just sending a flyer or posting invites may attract some but not others. Reach out with a personal connection. The Black Muslim students on the fringes may need additional support and incentives. Chaplains can play a crucial role in making this happen. Once a part of the group, students can quickly learn moral order and learning competencies. The development of social and organizational skills should include having Black students in leadership roles. They will bring a different perspective to what's being done. It will empower them and shatter any stereotypes that Black Muslims are ill-suited to lead.

3. Create a space with activities that allow students to learn together in Islam. A bonding takes place. Some may be on varying levels, but have “each one teach one.”

Mark DeVries suggests that developing an “emotionally healthy schedule” is suitable for our work and ministry.²⁰ I believe this is also good for the students. If they have an “emotionally healthy schedule” that allows them to be an integral part of the group of Muslims on campus, that will enable them to learn together as

¹⁹ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²⁰ Mark DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry: Why Most Youth Ministry Doesn't Last and What Your Church Can Do About It* (Surry Hills, NSW, Australia: Read How You Want, 2010).

Muslims. This schedule can include *halaqas* (study circles) on Tuesdays, Jummah on Fridays, MSA meetings the first Thursday, social activities every other Friday repeating every week and every month. The focal point, if possible, is the prayer space, which can be a gathering spot.

It allows the other students to also develop “emotionally healthy schedules” by seeing the value of including the Black students. Both groups learn the importance of working together and leave college with skills that are transferable to *masjid* leadership. Students come with varying levels of Islamic knowledge and can significantly benefit from learning from each other. Make each student where possible responsible for teaching another student. It allows the group to learn together and creates social skills that will last a long time. Follow the example of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ when he migrated to Yathrib, now Medina. The early Muslims came with nothing but their faith in Allah. Prophet Muhammad paired the migrants with the believers of Yathrib. This foundation of brotherhood established by the Prophet ﷺ was based on mutual economic and psychological support and the principle of being inheritors of one another, which in turn provided the migrants with support to get over the sorrow and misery they felt because of homesickness.²¹ |Establish Islamic study circles that pair new students with a current student to exchange learning. Help Black Muslim students overcome the sorrow and misery that many experience being at a PWI.

4. Have diverse representations of culture like food, *nasheeds* (music), and spoken-word artists at events that represent the heritage of all the students, not just Middle Eastern or South Asian, just because people think that’s considered “Islamic.”

Dr. Adair Lummis wants religious life professionals to understand that youth are an increasingly changing diverse population:

There is no one-size-fits-all youth culture anymore. That *did* exist in the first two waves of youth culture. But, likely, it will never exist again. There was a

²¹ “Brotherhood Established Between Migrants and the Ansar,” Questions on Islam, www.questionsonislam.com/article/brotherhood-established-between-migrants-and-ansar.

day in the not-too-distant past when the average high school entirely revolved around football players and cheerleaders. Today's high schools...are a goulash of subcultures...The splintering of youth culture has created a huge methodological quagmire for youth workers, especially those steeped in 'the right program is the answer' thinking."²²

Is there really a 'right program'? You're on the wrong path if you think one program will suit all students.

This is important to consider when MSAs want only to serve cultural food they believe to be Islamic or that represents one area of the planet to the exclusion of the other diverse representations of Islam around the globe. Have pizza to solve this problem, have wings and fries to solve this problem, but just serving South Asian food or Middle Eastern food can be seen as a microaggression by students from diverse backgrounds. Consider the *nasheeds* (vocals with percussion) by Native Deen, the spoken word of Amir Suleiman and/or Brother Ali. One menu does not suit all.

5. Allow students to develop a positive identity of who they are as Muslims by encouraging them to get involved in all aspects of campus life, including interfaith activities.

Dr. Adair Lummis, from Hartford Seminary, explains in a lecture that, for teenagers in the 21st century, studies indicate that socio-economic situation, race, ethnicity, birth country, parental household dynamics, family religious involvement and other youth with whom they encounter in school, congregation, or neighborhood may variously contribute to their religious beliefs and future congregational participation. Teenagers go to schools in the majority where students are from different religions, denominations, have no specific religious affiliation, or are atheists, and so will be hearing other viewpoints. Also important, many teenagers will become involved in sports, clubs, and social events outside their congregation, which will take their time and interests in directions other than religious observance and learning.

²² Adair Lummis, "Tackling Youth Issues" (lecture, Hartford Seminary, Hartford, CT, January 1, 2017).

The welcoming MSA can become an escape from the real world where Black students just stay to themselves when they experience racism from other students on campus. They can develop a lower sense of self-worth and become vulnerable to outside influences. Many Muslim students also want to explore and get involved in different areas on campus but the sting of racism can be repulsive. The MSA may be their starting point, but chaplains can encourage them to get involved in other activities like student government, interfaith groups, and alternative spring break. Chaplains can take note of the interactions between students and encourage other students to make room for the Black Muslims who may be feeling left out. Together, they all can be encouraged to become involved in a variety of activities on campus. These students live in a very diverse world, and what they learn on campus is what they take with them to live off-campus. At Howard University, I'm always on the lookout for the student who looks lost or left out. I find ways to include them in what we are doing. I also suggest activities for them to get involved with, activities that they might not have considered.

6. Encourage the development of good relationships between Muslim students, faculty, and staff. Dr. Lummis explains, "We can no longer expect that young adults will come through the doors of congregations on their own. Instead, we must make it a priority to go beyond our walls to engage this generation and co-create truly thriving communities of faith."²³

Students can easily get lost in the challenges of life on campus. Halima felt she had nowhere to turn. She just drifted away from the MSA and gravitated to the BSU. This challenge can have a positive side. The experience with Halima at the BSU can be educational for many students. She exposed other Black students to Islam who may never have interacted with a Muslim student on a social and cultural level. *Alhamdulillah*. That's a win in dispelling myths and stereotypes about Muslims. However, if there was a Muslim Chaplain who took notice of her being absent from events, that person could have reached out to her to encourage and engage her to be a part of another truly thriving community. After a conversation with her, the chaplain could also involve the MSA leadership to be more

²³ Lummis, "Tackling Youth Issues."

welcoming to Halima and other students like her or others who feel marginalized. We have white converts and immigrant Muslims at Howard University, and I make special efforts to ensure their inclusion in all that we do.

7. Help the students build brotherhood and sisterhood with appropriate activities that can also involve faculty and staff as mentors.

Vern L. Bengtson²⁴ contends that youth are most influenced (in regard to faith transmission) by their own immediate family, parents, and grandparents. It's critical also to have intergenerational activities that focus on the family as a unit. On-campus, the people students interact with can become like family. These adults are in the best positions to make Black Muslim students feel welcomed and a part of the community. They can model as parents often do appropriate behavior. They can help students navigate the challenges of making room in their assemblies for others. At Howard, our Jumma service is a mix of students, faculty, and staff who are also involved in other MSA events.

8. Connect students with the off-campus community that surrounds them and find ways for the students to engage in community service.

Damon Mayrl and Freeden Oeur²⁵ explain that “the best activities to strengthen students’ level of Religious Commitment include engaging in volunteer work, donating money to charity, joining a campus religious organization, and discussing religion with peers, faculty, or staff.” Encouraging all Muslim students to be a part of the Muslim Students Association can help create the best activities to strengthen students' level of religious commitment. Students can suggest community service projects like feeding the homeless, mentoring and tutoring, and much more. All students can feel welcomed by the inclusion of their ideas and suggestions. At Howard, the MSA worked with the MSAs at Georgetown, George Washington,

²⁴ Vern L. Bengtson, *Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down Across Generations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 203.

²⁵ Damon Mayrl and Freeden Oeur, “Religion and Higher Education: Current Knowledge and Directions for Future Research,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, no. 2 (2009), [doi:10.1111/j.1468-5906.2009.01446.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2009.01446.x).

American, George Mason Universities, and the University of Maryland to produce backpacks for the homeless that included toiletries that they collected on campus. This event brought a diverse group of Muslim students together for a most worthy cause.

Conclusion

The problems Black students face regarding racism do not disappear as soon as they step foot on any main campus USA. Nooses have been found on colleges around the country like American University, the University of Maryland, Kansas State University, and Amherst College, to name a few. Under the hashtag #feartheturtle, Black students detailed the racism they experienced at the University of Maryland.

Tweets include the following:

my first week in college park a white kid told me at a party that Obama was a monkey & that all black girls were ugly [#FearTheTurtle](#)
I left McKeldin after studying for my Chinese final. I got pulled over by campus police. “Why am I getting pulled over, sir?” “You looked out of place. Where are you coming from?” [#FearTheTurtle](#)

These are the experiences of Black students at the prestigious University of Maryland. What is it like for Black Muslims? Jamillah is a graduate of Howard University and is now in grad school at the University of Maryland. She frequently comes to Howard for Jummah and other MSA social events. When I asked her about her involvement with the MSA there, she explained it was a painful experience. She wanted to get involved with police brutality issues but was told that was “unIslamic,” and they were only concerned with Palestine and Syria. In their minds, the issues facing Black Muslims are dismissed as un-Islamic. Back to the totem pole of priority and authority. However, for Black Muslims and other Muslims, addressing police brutality most definitely is Islamic.

Much of a chaplain's work focuses on supporting students, colleagues, and institutional life in ways that those we care for may not even be aware of.²⁶ Black and Muslim students often want and need a chaplain to intervene on their behalf to make college life more meaningful and beneficial. Our work as chaplains places us at the intersections of tradition and innovation, secularity and the sacred, and in some ways, hope and despair.²⁷ Always choose hope. Black Muslim students desperately need a chaplain to intervene on their behalf, and these recommendations can help chaplains accomplish this divine task.

²⁶ Forster-Smith, *College & University Chaplaincy*, loc. 199–200.

²⁷ Forster-Smith, *College & University Chaplaincy*, loc. 188–189.