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# Development of Muslim spiritual care (Seelsorge) in Germany Challenges and perspectives

**Abstract:** In recent years, the debate about Islamic spiritual care in Germany has expanded. For a long time, politicians have been pushing for the training of Muslim chaplains. Underpinned by socio-political developments, a process of realisation has taken place. Since the winter semester 2016/17, it is now possible to study Practical Islamic Theology for Chaplaincy and Social Work at the University of Tübingen. Many students have taken up the degree programme primarily out of interest. At the same time, the uncertainties and indeterminacies regarding the graduates' professional perspectives are omnipresent and rather unclear. This chapter gives an overview of current developments in the master's programme and discusses the current requirements and challenges within this field.

## Introduction

The Muslim community in Germany is changing. Family and community care, which is shaped by religion and culture, is reaching its limits due to people's living, and working conditions. Long-term migration to Germany of Muslims and their families also requires professionalization and qualification of Spiritual care.

The practice of spiritual care for Muslims, however, is still done on a voluntary basis and takes a different form in Germany than in Catholic or Protestant in the country. This is because among the major churches in Germany, pastoral care in public institutions is a common field of cooperation between the state and religious communities. The decisive foundations for this are the constitutional right to freedom of faith, conscience, and confession (Art. 4 GG), the German constitutional law on religions and the federal and state laws based on it. In Article 140 in conjunction with Article 141 of Weimar State Constitution, the Basic Law guarantees religious communities a right of access to state institutions insofar as there is a need for worship and spiritual care in armed forces, hospitals, prisons, or other public institutions.<sup>1</sup> This is not the case with Muslim spiritual

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1 [https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch\\_gg/](https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_gg/).

care. Muslim spiritual counsellors help after accidents, in prisons and hospitals. They are needed, but mostly work on a voluntary basis. Unlike Christian chaplains, very few Muslim spiritual counsellors are employed in paid, full-time positions. Most Muslim spiritual care projects also rely on funding from Christian or government organizations. Although the number of projects is growing, the projects often rely on great commitment of individuals and are poorly networked among themselves. In addition, there is a lack of uniform training standards for Muslim spiritual counsellors (Aslan et al 2015, Aslan et al 2017, Hauschildt & Uçar 2010, Ceylan 2012)

To the principal question of self-understanding and the mission from which Muslim spiritual care and counselling can draw theologically and academically there is no uniform answer. Research and publication on this issue is still in its infancy in Germany and in other German-speaking countries. The most common publications are mainly practical reports on training and further education, anthologies on conferences and short reflections on the topics of chaplaincy and counselling in the Qur'an and in the traditions about the Prophet Muḥammad (Lemmen et al 2011, Wenz & Talat 2012, Ucar & Blasberg 2013, Begić et al 2014). Other contributions inform about the current development of training Muslim volunteers for Islamic chaplaincy and counselling (Badawia et al 2020) Cultural, legal and religious contexts as well as cooperation between Muslim and Christian partners are discussed (Hauschildt & Uçar 2010). Only a few studies, however, provide empirical research results in this area (Akca 2019, Aslan et al 2015, Aslan et al 2017, Rückamp 2021, Yanık-Şenay 2018, Şahinöz 2018). This could be due, firstly, to the fact that the sources and data on which the political statements of the Islam Conference and the research studies are based are incomplete and still raise relevant research issues. Secondly, further research challenges also arise from the fact that this is a highly politicised field and the people who are classified as Muslim spiritual care givers are not infrequently skeptical about research studies themselves. This chapter provides an overview of current developments in the Master's programme and discusses the current demands and challenges in the field. It draws on preliminary results from a survey of spiritual care professionals and Master's students during the study and practice phase. In the first part, I will explore the question of how Islamic spiritual care and counselling may be understood. In the second part, I will ask how Islamic spiritual care and counselling is discussed in the context of research studies. The third part is based on expert interviews, in which I will present aspects of Islamic spiritual care and counselling in the context of practice. In the concluding part, the following question will be discussed: What are challenges and opportunities associated with discussions on establishing Muslim spiritual care and counselling in Germany?

## Spiritual care, counselling in context of university Islamic theology

The initiation of German Islam Conference by the federal government in 2006 shows that the government has recognized needs for Islamic spiritual care and counselling in Germany. Since then, the government has supported the development of university-based Islamic theology. The German Islam Conference supports the goal of establishing institutionalised cooperation between the state and Islamic organizations and religious communities in Germany on the basis of the German constitutional law on religion. In principle, this also enables Islamic organizations to comprehensively exercise the rights of religious communities if they fulfil the constitutional requirements.

German constitutional law on religions provides for a variety of forms of cooperation between the state and religious communities. Among other things, they concern the area of education, such as religious education at public schools or theology at public universities. The German Islam Conference has already been able to provide important impulses in this area.<sup>2</sup> Since 2011, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) has been funding centers for Islamic theology in Tübingen, Frankfurt (with Gießen), Münster, Osnabrück and Erlangen-Nuremberg, and since 2019, institutes for Islamic theology have also been established at the Humboldt University in Berlin and at the University of Paderborn. According to BMBF, the locations of these centers reflect diversity of Muslim faith and life in Germany, and thus the academic system is responding to the growing plurality of religious currents in Germany by establishing a university-based Islamic theology. The teachers and academic staff in university Islamic theology have different regional, ethnic, and academic educational backgrounds. According to a survey commissioned by the Academy for Islam in Research and Society (AIWG) at Goethe University Frankfurt, there are currently about 2,500 students enrolled in bachelor's and master's programs at these centers.<sup>80</sup> per cent of the students are female. They state that they either want to teach as teachers in schools, work in social and spiritual care or stay in scholarship. All of them want to be actively involved in society. This social motivation of students of Islamic theology is often associated with the current discourse on Islam in society. One of the reasons given by the students in the surveys "Who studies Islamic theology?" (Dreier/Wagner 2020) was that the image of Islam

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.deutsche-islam-konferenz.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Ergebnisse-Empfehlungen/20170314-la-3-abschlussdokument-seelsorge.pdf?\\_\\_blob=publicationFile&v=7](https://www.deutsche-islam-konferenz.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Ergebnisse-Empfehlungen/20170314-la-3-abschlussdokument-seelsorge.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=7)

in society and the structures in Muslim organizations should be changed. Some students describe their experiences in the mosque as the motivation to study and to do things differently as future chaplains. In this respect, the motivation is also connected to the will to change – a change to which the students hope to contribute through their studies. A further motivation to change society through study lies in the way Islam is practiced in Germany and represented by “false” or self-appointed experts. Therefore, a concrete career perspective is an important factor for a successful graduation. However, due to the unclear career prospects for Muslim theologians, students rarely see specific perspectives to follow, even after graduation. Many graduates therefore orient themselves in the direction of the field of education. (Dreier/Wagner 2020).

In the winter semester of 2016/2017, a master’s program- Islamic Practical Theology for Spiritual Care and Social Work- also started at the Centre for Islamic Theology (ZITH) at the University of Tübingen, which is unique in Germany. The examination of diversity and faith in the context of migration and social work are core components of the degree program. This will prepare students in four semesters to work as spiritual and religious counsellors in hospitals, prisons, refugee work, in military, in schools, in elderly care or in mosque congregations. In addition to pedagogical and legal basis of spiritual care and social work, as well as theory and practice of Islamic rituals, the degree program has an intensive practical orientation through compulsory internships. During the study and internship phases, students develop individual professional competences and form their professional identity.

## **Islam, Spiritual Care and Counselling Contemporary First Interview Results**

The following results are based on first analyses of interviews within the framework of an empirical study on Islam, spiritual care and counselling. This study focuses on Muslim spiritual counsellors and allows them to comment on the topic of “Muslim spiritual care and counselling” in Germany. Within this framework, fifteen Muslim spiritual care givers and imams were interviewed in the time from 2019 to 2020. In the context of this study, I asked: How do chaplains in spiritual care and social work deal with the religious diversity of Muslim people seeking advice and with the diverse forms of living that have developed in the context of a plural society? In individual and group interviews, they talked about their understanding of “Muslim spiritual care” and about demands and challenges they face in practice. The respondents were working as imams, hos-

pital, and prison Muslim spiritual counsellors when the survey was conducted. Also, this study is currently in the publication phase and is part of one of my post-doctoral research projects.

The analysis revealed five “categories of spiritual care”. In the following, the categories are presented in short form to gain an insight into the practice of Muslim spiritual care and counselling in Germany.

## 1 Being close to human beings

I'm just here for you right now, everything else doesn't matter (Muslim spiritual counsellor 1, 28 years old. She studied Islamic theology in Germany, works as teacher in a primary school and part-time as Muslim counsellor in several hospitals).

Some of the Muslim spiritual counsellors, who were interviewed, describe their task as an effort to help people out of critical situations by assisting them. The major concern here is to help suffering people by giving comfort and strength. In this context, spiritual care can simply mean consolation and does not have to have a solution or immediate answer:

Working with people, working with people, yes? .... I can speak badly in categories, I have those here, especially in spiritual care, who have fallen into the debt trap. Then I have those who are drug addicts, who have a drug problem or another addiction. But I see each person individually. So, every person stands for him/herself, has his history, has his past, has his present, has his future, and has just as well his (sadness grief), his happiness and the way in which one shows his happiness and the way in which one shows grief. Exactly (Muslim spiritual counsellor 2, 31 years old. She studied Islamic Theology in Germany, works as Muslim counsellor on a part-time basis, in cooperation with the Christian pastoral and supports male prisoners and their families).

## 2 Living faith

Muslim spiritual care also means accompanying people in questions of faith and life, in crises and conflicts, in illness, death and grief. Spiritual care is the energetic proclamation and tells in its own way of the *Qur'an* revelations. The return to *Qur'an* and to traditional Muslim values can gain importance in crises. Without recitation of the *Qur'an*, something would be missing in spiritual care. For many Muslims, recitation is an essential form of faith lived in the Islam. Spiritual care can also be defined by ritual. It happens out of an attitude of mindfulness, and it is based in hope of God's mercy and acts out of mercy:

People are afraid that they will die. Furthermore, when you talk so openly about death and recite a few *Qur'an* verses, people feel comfortable. The recitation is the most effective. I think that recitations of the *Qur'an* are very helpful. For example, as I said before, 50 percent of counselling is just listening. I think maybe 30 percent, I guess now, is that you are reciting something from the *Qur'an*. Then maybe 20 percent, as they say. Of course, that is important, how you say that and how people take it. But I think the recitation you do and how you perform is very important (Muslim spiritual counsellor 3, 28 years old, born in Germany. After graduating from school in Germany, he studied Islamic theology in Turkey. Today he works as an Imam for a Muslim community in Germany).

### 3 Religious guidance

Spiritual care can be experienced as a religious experience. Some of those interviewed understand spiritual care as trust in life through trust in God, it gives hope where despair torments. In this sense, spiritual care means for them to show people the “right way”, whereby this understanding is based on revelations and traditions of the Prophet: With us, for example, spiritual care is from the Sunnah, with verses, with patience, etc. What does that mean? (...) A person is exhausted, he needs help, and another person offers it, but the problem is, with what does he offer it? With religious values, that is different to other help, but different than the others, because in psychology for example it is not religious. Spiritual care is an act between two people, one in a state that needs help, the other is, not giving, but offering, someone in that state who offers help, with what? With religious symbols, meanings, traditions, and values (Muslim spiritual counsellor 4, 52 years old, born in Turkey. He studied Islamic theology in Turkey. Since 2005 he has been working as a religious affairs advisor at the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (DİTİB; German: Türkisch-Islamische Union der Anstalt für Religion e.V.; Turkish: Diyanet İşleri Türk-İslam Birliği). He also trains Muslim spiritual counsellors.

One Muslim spiritual counsellor who belongs to one of the major Islamic religious communities in Germany, argues that a theological justification for Muslim spiritual care can only be established in an Islamic community:

Spiritual care is also a challenge. All Muslims in our mosques come and benefit from us, not only Turkish people, and if in the future we are recognized as we wish and can professionally train and lead Muslim spiritual counsellors, we will also address the other Muslim communities, not only Turkish ones (Muslim spiritual counsellors 4).

This demand that spiritual care may only be offered as a task of Muslim communities can be interpreted differently in this context. It meets the long-standing demands for recognition of Islamic religious communities as contact persons for Muslims in Germany. Article 4 (Freedom of faith and conscience) of the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany and Article 140 (Law of religious de-

nominations) of the Basic Law in conjunction with the following Art. 141 (To the extent that a need exists for religious services and pastoral work in the army, in hospitals, in prisons or in other public institutions, religious societies shall be permitted to provide them, but without compulsion of any kind) protect the freedom of faith, conscience and freedom. Article 137, (1) Weimar Constitution, there shall be no state church and (2) The freedom to form religious societies shall be guaranteed. Stand for the fundamental separation of church, religion and state as well as for the guarantee of religious freedom. From both results a fundamental duty of neutrality of the state towards the different religious communities. Religion can play a role in public life. In Germany, the state provides religious communities with opportunities for social action (e.g. religious education in state schools, hospital and prison chaplaincy). The state must not privilege any religion over others; rather the state must maintain a uniform attitude to all religions.

Muslim communities have existed in Germany for many decades. One of the ways in which religious communities can be recognised in Germany is through the status of a “public corporation”. This status comes with some special rights, such as the collection of membership fees by the state tax authorities, the maintenance of civil servant-like employment relationships or the operation of their own cemeteries. They are also automatically responsible for youth welfare. The Protestant and Catholic churches as well as the Jewish community were already granted corporate status in the Weimar Republic when the Basic Law came into effect. Religious communities must submit an application to be recognised as a religious community by the respective federal government. For example, in 2013, the religious community of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat in Hessen was recognised for the first time as an Islamic community with corporate status. The main challenge for Islamic applicants now is to prove membership. Some associations are in the process of changing their statutes, drawing up membership lists and forming regional associations in order to meet the requirements. In addition, consolidated structures, competences and resources have to be built up in order to be able to take on the tasks they are aiming for, such as in youth and senior citizen work. However, in order to be able to practice Islamic spiritual care, a legal recognition is necessary, because it provides access to participation and equal rights. It would certainly help to strengthen Muslims’ trust, sense of belonging to Germany and thus their participation.

This interview shows that mistrust of some Islamic religious communities towards the state influences the cooperation with the government, but also with Christian communities:

There are always attempts to subordinate Muslim spiritual care to Christian spiritual care, attempts are often made by churches or federal states, both unacceptable to us. This work must be given to one hand, something belongs to us, and something belongs to you. By hand giving I mean religiously and from the welfare association, thus a Muslim welfare association on federal level (...) the politicians and the churches are trying to regulate, so that they can do everything themselves according to the motto, we do not need Muslim spiritual care, they have *Qur'an* Apps on their mobile phones or whatever, but for us this is unacceptable (caregiver 4).

Islam is not hierarchically organized and does not know church and membership. Nevertheless, the state always demands that Muslims should found a kind of church (Uçar /Blasberg-Kuhnke 2013, Ceylan 2012). In addition, the major Islamic religious communities in Germany would like to have the role as “legal representation of all Muslims” in Germany:

Muslim plurality is also a challenge for us and the society. We always try to cooperate and work in a friendly way with other communities, e. g., the Bosnian and Albanian communities have signed brotherly agreements in a friendly way (...) we also try to integrate other Muslim nations and open the doors to our activities (Muslim spiritual counsellor 4).

But it is above all important that in every model of state cooperation for the establishment of Muslim spiritual care the range of Islamic influences is presented. Both Muslim spiritual counsellors and those seeking advice want to recognize their religion in everyday life and do not want to have a unified church.

## 4 Prevention

Spiritual care can fulfill a protective function, as prevention, in the sense of care. This includes the early identification of risks before problems can arise and can be used to prevent violence and radicalism.

So, to speak, this is also a prevention, that one deals with people in advance in such a way that they do not reach this stage, that they need spiritual care. (Muslim spiritual counsellor 3).

Spiritual care as prevention also means that Muslim spiritual counsellors gain insight to difficult themes through their conversations and consultations, so-called taboo issues, which primarily concern and affect young people. This content that is reluctantly spoken to parents and family because young people feel ashamed, do not feel understood or are afraid of an unpleasant reaction from the



person they are talking to. There are social themes in life, such as questions of faith and questions about sexuality, which are also asked in spiritual care:

I'm always open to everything. And in my mosque tours, I also always like to mention that there are *Qur'an* verses that call to use the mind. And then I say: "Please ask everything, ask all questions. You have the opportunity here to ask a Muslim, whether he is an Imam or not, all the questions. I am not omniscient, but as far as possible I will try ... Because I confess myself as a Muslim, therefore I believe in all this. You have the opportunity to really ask anything". That is what I do in my conversations. That is why there is no issue for me to talk about so called taboos. And when someone says, "I did *Zinā*", then he sinned. (The term "*Zinā*" in the *Qur'an* refers to forbidden sexual relations, adultery. (*Qur'an* 24:4).

I sin too. Of course, we do not do it ... We do not want to do it, but we are weakly created, we also sin every day. So, when you talk like that and they think, "Okay, I've done something wrong, but he still does see me as a Muslim". Then you start talking. So far, I have never blocked anyone on any topic, But I can imagine that other Imams have some taboo topics (Muslim spiritual counsellor 3).

## 1 "Living-world orientation"

Spiritual care also means perceiving the reality of people's lives. In this context, spiritual care is interested in how people live, what shapes people and what this means for the mission of Muslim spiritual counsellors in Germany.

If I go in, I do not know what makes the family tick now, do I? May have a Turkish migrant context, but that does not mean anything. And can be more atheistic, more secular. That is why I just go in and see how the family welcomes me, whether the family wants me to help or not. And I try then, yes, just to be there, to support them, just give the signal I am here whenever they need to talk. That is perfectly okay. And then when it comes: Can you do that? ... That was the case with another colleague who then said that the family itself said: We cannot read the *Qur'an* at all, can you? Would you say a prayer? Then we will do it. But no other way. Well, there must be a need from the family. Nothing is being put over there. And when the family says: "I don't need it" – it is okay too (Muslim spiritual counsellor 5, 48 years old. She studied Islamic Studies and Pedagogy in Germany and works in family counselling and part-time in emergency spiritual care).

In interviews, it is often said that spiritual care always focuses on people in its counselling and would develop appropriate support and help along individual experiences, needs and drafts of people seeking advice:

To say so I understand you and that's okay the way you're acting right now. And do not come with your finger and say, "Oh, oh, you can't say that". No. Very, very important: Ability to be patient and tolerant! Yes, I do (Muslim spiritual counsellor 5).

The living world that is meant here contains the subjective construction of reality (Grunwald & Thiersch 2016). This world of people seeking advice is direct, individual, and is according differently for children or adults, for men and women, for people with and without migration biographies, for religious and non-religious people:

You don't know how religious the family is or so. It does not matter. I am not giving any tips from *Qur'an* or anything like that, but rather that one really gives comfort as human being to human being. That as a human being you simply hold hands and comfort each other (Muslim spiritual counsellor 5).

But even within respective groups of people and families in structurally comparable situations, the living world of the individual people are subjectively not comparable. The world in which Muslim family, the fourth generation of which lives in Germany, lives is subjectively completely different from that of a Muslim family that has just immigrated to Germany. The world in which we live is an expression of the individuality of each person:

Usually, I come in and the person is irritated or pleasantly surprised. And I am not saying I am a Muslim spiritual counsellor! But I say: I wanted to visit you, I work here on an honorary basis, how are you? I am already starting the conversation a little. Rarely, but it happens that I come in and the person starts crying and immediately starts talking. These are exactly the conversations where I am very grateful that I visited the patient because I realized that he or she was waiting for a person to give him or her attention (Muslim spiritual counsellor 1).

Some interviewees understand the term spiritual care as a process of sensitive interaction between people. Spiritual care is communication, empathy, and a kind of help in life, in sense of help for self-help, where being human is in the center. In this context, the functions of counselling, conversation, and communication, also the religious sensibility play an important role (Nauerth et al 2017).

Other interviewees understand spiritual care as a religious guidance given by the spiritual Muslim counsellors. Spiritual care is also situation-dependent and the boundaries between religious and helping counselling in conversation can be fluid. In spiritual care there are people who need help to get out of their situations or crisis. The extent to which religion is effective in the setting of counselling and when and how the category "religion" is updated or called

up in spiritual care and counselling depends on person seeking advice but also on mission and guiding principles of Muslim communities of spiritual care.

It is not the case that a Muslim understanding of spiritual care in Germany has to be imported from Islamic majority countries. One of the interviewees stated that “it is not necessary to reinvent the wheel” and that Muslim spiritual care can benefit from the previous experience of Christian spiritual care in an inter-religious context.

The results of the interviews show that there are different possibilities of practice. Thus, the implementation of Muslim spiritual care is linked to a certain independence in the context of a plural society in Germany. Particularly regarding Muslim diversity in Germany, this can also open possibilities for establishing a kind of “care” that considers the realities of the lives of those affected. The reality is that Muslims in Germany are very diverse, also due to migration.

Accordingly, spiritual care and counselling must start from a position that accepts diversity. Spiritual care must assume that all people have the right to their own understanding of religion and that they have the right to be cared for adequately. In the Muslim spiritual care, it is often mentioned that diversity is wanted in Islam and in the *Qur’an*. This is also the case, but in reality, it is often much more complicated. The situation in Germany has led Muslims to identify new common interests, all of which revolve around the question of equality with the other religious communities and the desire to be able to live Muslim religious life here on an equal basis and without discrimination. These issues were, and still remain, about mosque construction, religious instruction, the headscarf, and spiritual care. As a result, Germany-wide spiritual care services have come into being.

However, it is apparent that Muslim diversity is often perceived as a challenge in spiritual care. One reason for the challenge in dealing with Muslim diversity is certainly the uncertainty caused by the realities of life in a plural society. This also means, as the interviews show, that traditionally taboo subjects are not discussed in the families. One of these taboos is the topic of sexuality. Here, there seems to be the least room for necessary questioning of traditional values and beliefs that dominate and burden the daily lives of many, sometimes unconsciously, sometimes involuntarily.

Considering this context, it is important for Muslim spiritual care to give space to people who long for a way of life that is not controlled and ruled by the heteronormative constraints and has its own space outside this norm. In this sense, Muslim spiritual care and counseling should be open to all people, regardless of age, gender or sexual orientation, and also regardless of membership in a Muslim religious community.

## Discussion

# Muslim Spiritual Challenges and Perspectives

Age, gender, and education play an important role in the context of Muslim spiritual care. According to some Muslim spiritual counsellors, these factors can influence the effectiveness of spiritual care. The following part states an overview of challenges and perspectives in Germany:

### 1 Professional stress among Muslim spiritual counsellors and Imams

The results show that Muslims often seek the advice of religious scholars or Imams after praying in the mosque or between times of praying in communities. In this context, those seeking advice come to scholars with many questions and expect some form of support on the questions and problems they experience throughout life. The purpose of counselling can range from providing information on theological issues to counselling which requires professional support in different situations. Depending on the subject which the advice is directed to, such as a legal or health issue, different professions are necessary, which require not only theological knowledge but also different methods and approaches in human and social sciences:

So, I can tell the way I experience it in mosque community. People, no matter what, if they do not find a place to go, come directly to the Imam and expect that he can do everything, to cover all their needs. Whether they are looking for a job, whether they have a problem with their wife (...) And that is what happens every day when people come to the mosque. Moreover, if these Imams do not have a counselling training or further education, then of course it is more difficult. What I also said before, that it is already a part of their tasks, because they are preachers. They try to follow the tradition of the prophet as much as possible (...) Sometimes solutions are simple, but you must listen to the people until the end, patient listening without teaching, or it will not do any good. They will think that the Imam, he could not listen properly, he cannot help! That is why you must take the time and have the intention to be there for all as Muslim spiritual counsellors (Muslim spiritual counsellor 3).

People consider spiritual care in the form of counselling when they cannot make progress with solving problems within their family. Consultation usually takes place within the framework of mosque offers and an Imam or a theologian usually carries them out.

Spiritual care in mosque communities happens in contexts of crises and unforeseeable experiences, which are often connected to emergencies. In some situations, both theologians and Imams may not be able to solve the problems. A referral of people seeking advice by professional counselling institutions seems essential, e. g., in case of acute psychological problems, suicide or traumatic experiences; However, spiritual care can reach its limits:

A topic that overtaxed me, but that was also such an extreme example again, it was about a 14-year-old Muslim young girl who was brain dead. She was in the intensive care unit, the family did not want to accept this, because she was still at the devices and her heart was still beating through the devices. That means I had a very difficult situation. I had a family who could not handle it, who did not want to accept it, and a staff who finally wanted to convey that she was dead. And first, this acceptance of brain death was an issue for me where I noticed ... We had it in training, but brain death is like death when two doctors confirm it. But I had the feeling that the family thought I was on the side of the doctors. Well, I noticed right away that they could not take me on yet. And then there's organ donation. So, the doctor wanted to talk about this. And that was too much for me. To address this topic with this family was an unbelievable overload for me because I knew, they cannot even cope with death, the organ donation, that will not be an issue now. I felt between the two chairs in this case and did not feel free at all. So, I had the feeling that the doctor absolutely wants me to be there, that I somehow want to clear up topics for him. In addition, a family who misunderstood my role at the beginning because her mother thought I was coming [...] She saw me and said, "Ah, I've been waiting for you. I am like, um, okay. She thought I could talk to the doctor and prevent the devices from being turned off. Well, that was one of those situations where I realized my role was not clear here. So, I am being pulled from both sides. And certain topics ... I did not have the self-confidence to address certain topics that way either. Organ donation. I said organ donation was allowed. But I was also totally afraid of the reaction. Well, that was very overwhelming for me (Muslim spiritual counsellor 1).

From time-to-time questions can arise within the framework of Muslim spiritual care, for which a cooperation between psychological counselling, Muslim and Christian spiritual care would be a more suitable method. Many Muslim spiritual counsellors would like to work together in an interreligious or interfaith network. They would like to work in cooperation with Christian spiritual care on site. They have the opinion that they would benefit from the experience of Christian spiritual care and psychological counseling a lot:

When I came from Turkey as Imam, they just asked me to do everything. And I had never actually done many things before and had never known many things either. And there was an expectation that I could do just anything. And there I was ... Just like a non-swimmer in a sea, I found myself. Of course, I learned quickly and a lot. If, for example, you need counselling, then you simply go to Imam, because he can do that easily. If someone, for example ... My first (break) burial was already interesting because I could not do it. I just ... In theory,

I had that. Well, I do not want to say fortunately now, but fortunately my grandpa died two years ago. So, where I got there, it was the first time I experienced how to do it. I then introduced it to my ... like Imams have prayed, and then I could do it myself, exactly. For example, shortly afterwards I had already buried a baby who had died at the age of four weeks. You do not know anything, and you expect everything from the Imam. And I do not know if there is going to be a ceremony. So, in theory, what you must do, like, towards graves, I do not know. You probably know everything, but you think there has got to be some sort of process. Since this was missing, I invented something myself, I said: Okay, now this, let us do this and that. Exactly ... I think one could learn a lot from Christian chaplaincy, because a lot also appears there ... But this does not work for these Turkish mosque communities because they simply do not speak German. That is why these dialogues do not exist. I am sorry for this (Muslim spiritual counsellor 3).

## 2 Taboos and controversial subjects

In spiritual care, themes such as education, relationship problems, psychological problems, or burnouts as well as problems within families or between young people are often mentioned. Interestingly, in spiritual care there are also inquiries that explicitly deal with social issues or taboo topics. The elderly generation of Imams und Muslim spiritual counsellors is confronted with challenges of responding to questions on both social and theological issues. Regarding social issues, Imams try to find out what a theological response to issues might look like. In this context, the attitude towards competence in consulting is particularly stressed:

I'm always open to everything, in my mosque tours; I may always mention that there are Qur'an verses that call for using the mind. And then I say: Please ask everything, ask all questions. You have the opportunity here to ask a Muslim, whether it is an Imam or not, all the questions. I am not omniscient, but as far as possible I will try ... Because I confess myself as a Muslim, therefore I also believe in all this. You can really ask anything. That is what I do in my conversations. That is why there is no issue for me what's taboo. And when someone says, "I did Zinā". Then he sinned. I sin too. Of course, we do not do it ... We do not want to do it, but we are weakly created, we sin every day (Muslim spiritual counsellor 3).

He also responds to the question of whether young women would also receive advice from him during a crisis as follows:

We also try to support women. However, there are many things that women want to talk about only with women. One woman has lost her child; another has experienced physical violence through her husband. It is better for them to seek advice from a sister in our mosque community (Muslim spiritual counsellor 3)

He remarks self-critically in the interview that the men in spiritual care still have a lot to learn about dealing with women. At the same time, he asks for understanding:

It is not necessarily easy for men in Muslim communities to deal with women as a matter of course (Muslim spiritual counsellor 3).

His opinion is that gender should not be played off against each other. Women are very important for the communities:

If women today stopped working in Muslim communities, the community would collapse (Muslim spiritual counsellor 3)

### 3 Gender issues

Gender in counselling can have an important meaning in the context of Muslim spiritual care. For example, those seeking advice may feel uncomfortable while discussing intimate and sensitive issues with Muslim spiritual counsellors of a different gender.

The results of interviews show that there is no fixed rule in counselling situations of spiritual care, only a sensitivity about when and on which topics people seeking advice might feel uncomfortable:

And when I look at it this way: “Okay, the woman also needs comfort in the sense that she gets hugged, just when she has this need to cry, and when I just offer her my shoulder, just hug her, that is okay with a Muslim woman when I do that. But it could be difficult when a male emergency counsellor is there, and she has this need, and he cannot do that at that moment. Or the other way around, if there is a man there now whom I would also like to hug and where it does not work out like that right now, then it would be good male / male, female / female (Muslim spiritual counsellor 5).

Clearly, the question of gender in some contexts depends on culture and age. The results of the interviews confirm the conclusion that it is very unusual, mostly in Muslim contexts, to discuss any kind of personal issue with persons of other gender. Many Muslim spiritual counsellors feel overwhelmed and left alone in this situation:

From my own experience, I can say it plays a role, definitely. I have personally experienced, at least with my peers, with men who are a little younger, in middle age, as a young woman, that access is simply not there. So, I did not always feel respected or taken seriously. And after some bad experiences, I decided that I would not do that anymore. So that I only visit

male patients from a certain age, who are perhaps also seriously ill, emergencies. But otherwise, up to a certain age I have decided for myself ... And I have noticed that it is generally the case that women have issues that they can only discuss with women. And men have issues they can only discuss with men. And so, gender plays a role. But this does not mean that one should close oneself off to the opposite gender, only that each one must decide for oneself to what extent one can open oneself. There are some who say, "I don't mind the patient just hitting on me. They are not all like that. But there are some like me who, after a few experiences, then, to avoid that again, decide for themselves: We're not doing this again. So, this is it (Muslim spiritual counsellor 1)

There may also be situations where gender issues can be important, for example when giving and taking of Muslim spiritual counsellors and seekers are very different. For example, in a crisis. It may be helpful to check whether the assistance offered corresponds to current crisis of person seeking:

We had one, he had just been on emergency call. He then wrote to the WhatsApp group about rape, about death by rape, and he is male ... And then he said: "I think it's better if one of the sisters goes somehow than if I go now as a male Muslim spiritual counsellor. And there went another emergency spiritual counsellor (Muslim spiritual counsellor 5).

The aspect of gender in spiritual care and counselling does not necessarily have to be a problem: On the one hand, Gender can influence spiritual care context and the further use of counselling services by people in crisis situations. Often female Muslim spiritual counsellors report that spiritual care can be influenced by gender variables, both in communication and in counselling settings. However, this does not necessarily lead to the failure of the consultation. For example, Janna, who works with Muslim men in prison, is confident that gender bias can influence spirituality. She pleads for gender sensitivity, which can often lead to successful consultation:

So, with men in Prison, I had the feeling that ... Well, for one thing, they looked at me with big eyes: There's one I know from my culture, my religious context, yeah? I know a covered woman, one who wears a headscarf. What is she doing in an institution like this now? For one thing. But then also the openness and of course the acceptance, because in the end the prisoners took part in my group lessons and partly came to talks. Of course, there are also prisoners who want to test this in their own way, yes? To what extent does my counterpart bring theologically sound knowledge? This is not only possible in terms of gender, but above all in terms of age. So, the younger you appear, the more implausible it might seem. And the whiter hair you have, the wiser the counsellor will be (Muslim spiritual counsellor 2).

She shows here that gender is partly constructed by social expectations. The results of interviews also show that gender differences can be time- and culture-



dependent. The low proportion of women in the practice of Muslim spiritual care in prison shows how much role assignments are subject to social change. She does not consider her role as a “Muslim spiritual counsellor in men’s prison” to be unusual. She believes that according to Islamic understanding, women can also work with men. Even then, at the time of the Prophet, the role of women in society was very diverse. Women were nurses, teachers and even allowed to preach as Imams. There is a collection of the Prophet’s traditions that make it clear that women had many and different roles in society. She argues: When Muslims today discuss whether a woman as an Imam can do the prayers, including the Friday prayers in the mosque or in prison, there is a clear answer from me: yes, we can! In addition, this is confirmed by the Islamic tradition (Muslim spiritual counsellor 2).

## 4 Spiritual care and age

Sometimes challenges can be a question of age. Young counsellors may be perceived as inexperienced and less competent in counselling. For example, a patient in hospital may have doubts about the ability of a younger counsellor.

I also have the problem, I am 28, I look like 18. The moment I enter the room – and I have experienced this before – they are still looking for the Imam (Muslim spiritual counsellor 3).

In the same way, a young person seeking advice may feel that the Muslim spiritual counsellor is too young to understand his or her life situation.

I once had a situation where a female relative saw me and was disappointed. She said: Ah, I was expecting an older gentleman. I wanted my mother to have her recited from the Qur’an. I told her I could do that, too. Then I took my Qur’an and I recited it. And I think she was a little ashamed of it and she was also very grateful. So, this picture of her: It must be an elderly gentleman with a beard reciting the Qur’an (Muslim spiritual counsellor 1).

Like gender characteristic, age differences in spiritual care and counselling are not necessarily an obstacle, but they can make spiritual care more difficult depending on context.

## 5 Education and employment

A special challenge in spiritual care and counselling is the characteristics of theologians trained “in Germany” or “abroad”. The results of interviews show that Muslim community continues to prefer Muslim Imams who are trained in their home countries and then sent to Germany to teach and preach.

The communities fear that their faith could be deformed by the “institutional science” in Germany. Furthermore, some Muslim communities do not agree with the contents of Islamic theology at German universities. In their opinion, teaching of a Muslim theological education at a German state university is not equal to teaching at Turkish universities. Until today, the major Muslim communities in Germany support training of their Imams and theologians at the theological universities in Turkey:

Theological basic training is a must, either at a recognized institution or in Turkey ... At the moment we cannot prevent that the education today and now in Germany is so different, we have only experience with agreed religion commissioners, here in the mosques, who complete their theology studies in Turkey, come back and are hired here, after cooperation it is decided to also support them, but are then hired by religious communities, paid by Turkey, they are German-speaking, born here, but studied in Turkey... I can only say that they have much more luck here than the others, are more accepted... Those who have studied in Turkey, if they are employed, will be accepted more positively than the others, also by the communities. This week we have organized a one-week training in Turkey, it is all internal students who have studied in Turkey, and 150 students are now in Ankara (Muslim spiritual counsellor 4).

Despite numerous efforts to further expand the training of Imams in Germany, according to a study published by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation almost 90 percent of Imams working in Germany come from abroad. The Imams come mainly from Turkey (Jacobs/Lipowsky 2019).

Since 2016, the first of the approximately 2.500 students currently enrolled at German universities have completed their studies in Islamic theology. Only a few have managed to find employment in spiritual care or as an Imam (Dreier/ Wagner 2020). The reasons for the lack of prospects in the profession are manifold. Besides the lack of acceptance by the mosque communities, the theologians fail because of open legal questions and institutional difficulties. This is also since Muslims are not organized as corporations under public law and do not have the financial means to adequately pay Muslim spiritual counsellors, teachers, and Imams. Another problem with the integration of graduates into the existing structures of spiritual care is, according to the Adenauer Foundation, the headscarf. Most students are women and many of them wear the headscarf. However, this is exactly what teachers and educators are forbidden to do in most federal states in Germany (Jacobs/Lipowsky 2019). A further point is that also the Muslim communities in Germany today can hardly imagine hiring a woman for public spiritual care or as Imam (Borchard/ Ceylan 2011).

## Conclusion

This contribution shows that the academic foundations for the training of Muslim chaplains have been laid in Germany. For some years now, models for the training, financing and employment of Muslim spiritual counsellors have been discussed and tested at various institutions. Since 2016, the Centre for Islamic Theology at the Eberhard Karl University of Tübingen has been offering a master's program in Islamic Practical Theology for Spiritual Care and Social Work. The first graduates have already completed their studies.

Furthermore, the article identifies current challenges and requirements for establishing Islamic spiritual care and counselling in Germany. Firstly, the increasing religious plurality means that people of different religions are also seeking spiritual care and counselling. For Muslim counsellors, this means clarifying whether and how they can provide spiritual care to accompany religious diversity. As mentioned, the *Qur'an* and the tradition of the Prophet represent, among other things, the theoretical content of Islamic spiritual care and counselling. Clearly, a normative approach is often used to justify spiritual care and counselling in scholarship. Furthermore, the empirical studies show that both Muslim spiritual counselling and Muslim counselling are always a voluntary offer.

A further aspect is that Muslim spiritual counsellors also represent religion, a concrete religion, and they have a clear Islamic religious position from the outset and fill this position with their faith in the encounter and in the conversation. Spiritual counsellors may also encounter people who have different religious positions or no religious position at all, or who have different ideas about questions of meaning and faith. For example, in daily life situations, the topic of conversation may not be about God and faith, but rather about the challenges and demands of everyday life. It can be deduced from this that counselling or spiritual care settings do not have to be viewed only from a religiously based perspective. Rather, context and cause of encounter always determine what happens in spiritual care or counselling, in what forms it takes place and what is to be understood by Muslim spiritual care, and what is not. It also becomes obvious here that a Muslim spiritual counsellor must be prepared to consider the religious diversity in society. The issue of religious diversity is playing an increasingly important role in the discussion of Islamic spiritual care. In Islam, religious diversity is also evident not only in the large denominational currents of Sunnis, Shiites and Alevis, but also with regard to local traditions and personal preferences. This diversity can be legitimized with verses from the Koran. Many Muslims see the diversity of Islamic ways of thinking and living as something posi-

tive that distinguishes Islam as a religion without cultural boundaries. According to Hundhammer (2020), the main challenge, however, lies in those areas where normative scriptures of Islam primarily provide restrictive or simply no answers, such as in questions of homosexuality and transgender. As Hundhammer points out, methods of deductive norm derivation, such as the “*maqāṣid aš-Šarī‘a*” can offer solution models here, but only if a certain minimum textual basis can be drawn upon. However, examples from practice – such as Muslim hospital spiritual care and brain death question – show that there are cases in which normative texts remain silent (Hundhammer 2020). Furthermore, Tittus-Düzcan emphasises that the Qur’anic revelations consider humans’ own neediness towards God and that the Islamic image of humans in relation to the soul is, however, by no means negative or pessimistic. He assumes that the image of human beings is decisive for spiritual care. According to this, Muslim spiritual care is characterised by the fact that it is based on the Islamic view of human beings and considers the God-human relationship as the basic building element of its help (Tittus-Düzcan 2020). Tittus-Düzcan affirms that religiosity, spirituality, and ritual acts, as found in the Qur’an and in the Prophet’s traditions, can become a decisive effective factor for healing mental suffering. In particular, the strengthening of spiritual resources is shown to be a necessary field of action for spiritual care. For this reason, Islamic theological knowledge must be an important precondition in counselling work with Muslims. However, it is important to examine the extent to which Muslim counselling seekers are open to spiritual and religious elements in crisis situations. The fact that a person calls himself a Muslim does not necessarily mean that spirituality is of great importance to him as a coping strategy. Therefore, the request here is that trained Muslim spiritual counsellors should always be aware that the need for help for those affected can vary greatly (Tittus-Düzcan 2020, 148). Moreover, the legal basis and financial support from the state are still considered to be the main challenges for establishing Islamic spiritual care and counselling in the lack of such support. As mentioned before, there is a so-called representative institution for religious and faith communities, such as the representative institutions of the two large Catholic and Protestant churches in Germany, to be able to appoint chaplains to public state institutions. Until these representative institutions are officially recognized by the state, they are not allowed to appoint Muslim spiritual counsellors. They are only able to appoint when they have been officially recognized. Likewise, the question of whether and under what conditions Muslim communities or umbrella organizations can be religious communities in the future is still one of the most challenging questions of religious constitutional law, and which remains unanswered. This means that those who have completed their studies can work at hospitals, prisons and in the military, but cannot be appointed to

serve as chaplains. This situation means that the profession of Muslim spiritual counsellors in Germany is not in an attractive and active status.

The point to be made here is that Muslim spiritual counselling is always interwoven with the lives of those seeking advice and that both life and practice are indispensable as productive sources for spiritual counselling. Accordingly, both spiritual care and counselling have a mandate to work for the benefit of people in a wide variety of life situations. To realize this mandate, they need to know about the scope of methods and concepts in the context of theology and the realities of Muslims' lives. Ultimately, spiritual care and counselling have the task of developing ways of helping and coping with new social issues. For this, they need access to knowledge through research. It involves basic research to elaborate the diverse lifeworlds of Muslims in Germany. How the practical implementation of Muslim spiritual care in Germany develops, remains to be seen. However, one must not forget that it is about people who need spiritual care and counselling in certain situations in the here and now. To make this possible, spiritual care needs to be located within the institutional and legal framework in Germany. For example, cooperation between the state, churches and Muslim religious communities can offer opportunities for establishing Muslim spiritual care in Germany. This also raises the question of what alternative spiritual care formats are available if Islamic spiritual care is not available. For example, possibilities for interreligious spiritual care can be considered, that is, spiritual care by Muslims, for Muslims and for all, to be close to all people.

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