

Article

Nonreligious Chaplains and Spiritual Care

Amy Lawton , Adah Anderson  and Wendy Cadge 

Department of Sociology and The Chaplaincy Innovation Lab, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA 02453, USA

* Correspondence: amylawton@brandeis.edu

Abstract: Spiritual care in a religiously plural society necessarily includes care for the nonreligious. However, little is known about the nonreligious people who themselves work to provide spiritual care. Today, spiritual care providers, better known in the United States context as chaplains, come from a wide variety of religious backgrounds, including nonreligious or unaffiliated with religious tradition. While nonreligious chaplains have robust pluralistic skillsets—a professional strength and a benefit to spiritual care work—they nonetheless encounter training and workplace challenges specific to their religious identities. The theoretical framework of Christian normativity could account for these challenges.

Keywords: religious pluralism; chaplains; spiritual care; religious nones; nonreligious; religious diversity in the United States

1. Introduction

A chaplain is a religious leader who provides spiritual care in secular contexts (Sullivan 2014). Although spiritual care is a multifaith endeavor in many parts of the world today, the term “chaplain” itself has Christian origins. Religion and legal scholar Winnifred Sullivan notes that the work of chaplaincy probably preceded Christianity in some form, but that it was the Constantinian revolution that created “the formal need for Christian ministers to serve as representatives of the church in secular contexts” (Sullivan 2014, p. 4).

Given this history, a “nonreligious chaplain” may seem a contradiction in terms. However, chaplains without a connection to a formal religious tradition or who lack a personal god in their theologies are increasingly a part of the religious and spiritual landscape of the United States. Although nonreligious chaplains remain small in number, institutions such as healthcare systems, universities, and prisons turn to nonreligious chaplains to help provide spiritual care to the ever-increasing number of religious “nones” they serve.

Nonreligion constitutes a large and important part of the religious diversity that exists in the United States, and the demographic changes heralded by the rising Millennial Generation and Generation Z (born 1982–1996 and 1997–2012, respectively) cement the necessity of including the nonreligious in ongoing and future discourse about both religious pluralism and spiritual care. The nonreligious and religiously unaffiliated—taken together, the so-called nones, as in “none of the above” (Vernon 1968)—make up the fastest growing religious group in the United States, accounting for 30% of Americans overall (Pew Research Center 2022) and as many as four in ten members of the Millennial Generation and Generation Z. Nonreligious chaplains have an important role in serving this segment of the population and may be particularly well suited to the work of integrating nonreligion into spiritual care. Current research suggests that a person who is an atheist or is otherwise nonreligious might reject a chaplain out of wariness (Potts et al. 2023) or might shut down a conversation with a chaplain if they feel judged for their beliefs (Klitzman et al. 2022). These outcomes may be less likely if the chaplain is nonreligious as well.

Our study focuses on the nonreligious chaplains themselves in order to learn more about how they do the work of spiritual care and religious pluralism. We ask, first, how



Citation: Lawton, Amy, Adah Anderson, and Wendy Cadge. 2023. Nonreligious Chaplains and Spiritual Care. *Religions* 14: 1166. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14091166>

Academic Editors: Annette Haussmann and Isabelle Noth

Received: 2 August 2023

Revised: 8 September 2023

Accepted: 11 September 2023

Published: 13 September 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

nonreligious chaplains conduct their work as spiritual caregivers. Second, we ask what the experiences of nonreligious chaplains indicate about religious pluralism more broadly.

2. Data and Methods

2.1. Study Design and Analysis

To investigate the experiences of nonreligious chaplains, we interviewed 21 chaplains who trained or worked in the United States. Although some were informed by a variety of religious traditions, all chaplains interviewed for this study viewed themselves as nonreligious by some definition. We recruited the chaplains by announcing the research through the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab mailing list. Interested participants were asked to fill out a short Qualtrics survey to determine eligibility. Participants were eligible if they identified as atheist, agnostic, humanist, spiritual but not religious, or otherwise religiously unaffiliated, and if they were working as a chaplain or studying to become a chaplain. Four religious chaplains expressed interest in the study but were deemed ineligible because they identified themselves as religious. At the end of August 2022, we had received 39 completed screening surveys from members of the mailing list, of whom 35 were deemed eligible. Eligible survey respondents were invited by email to participate in a Zoom interview. The response rate to this invitation was 60%.

Zoom interviews lasted between 33 and 78 min and were conducted by one researcher using a semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide is included in Appendix A. At the time of the interview, respondents were given the choice between using their first name or using a pseudonym in the research, as approved by the Brandeis University IRB. The interview audio was recorded and subsequently transcribed by Rev.com. One female postdoctoral scholar (AL) conducted the interviews during the months of August and September 2022. She, along with a female undergraduate research assistant (AA), analyzed the data abductively using Atlas.ti 22 software. Abductive analysis is commonly called “inference to the best explanation” and is used by social scientists to orient to the best place to focus their attention (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). The methodology was grounded theory, and the researchers performed focused coding (Charmaz 2014, pp. 138–61).

2.2. Sample Demographics

Two-thirds of respondents identified as women ($N = 14$), and a similar number identified as white ($N = 15$). Eighteen respondents worked in healthcare settings including hospices. Of the remaining three, two were still students and one worked as a university chaplain. All twenty-one chaplains were trained in the United States and nineteen were currently working in the United States. One was working outside of the United States, and one was unemployed. The chaplains ranged in age from 29 to 66 years old at the time of the interview, with a mean age of 44 years.

All twenty-one chaplains were nonreligious, a term we view as slightly more specific than the colloquial use of “nones”. The term “nones” as it is deployed today is usually inclusive of multiple nonreligious identities, including the spiritual but not religious, humanists, atheists, agnostics, seekers, and unchurched believers who are theists but unaffiliated with a formal religious tradition. There is no universally preferred terminology that captures all nuances of these diverse identities. For the purposes of this study, we considered the non-religious to include all of the “none of the above” identities except unchurched believers, which we define as people with a personal god in their theology who are nonetheless not affiliated with a congregation (Baker and Smith 2009). We excluded unchurched believers because they, unlike other nones, have evidenced a personal preference for religious beliefs over nonreligion (ibid.).

Most chaplaincy jobs require a graduate-level theological degree (Cadge et al. 2022). Eighteen respondents had engaged in master’s level work in theology or spiritual care. Two respondents did not report their highest degree earned, and one respondent reported holding a four-year college degree. The most common graduate degree was the Master

of Divinity (MDiv.), held by one-third of respondents (N = 7), but some other chaplains interviewed felt that this had not been an option for someone of their religious identities.¹

3. Findings

3.1. Skills of Nonreligious Chaplain

We asked how nonreligious chaplains conduct their work as spiritual caregivers. We were not the first people to ask this question; many chaplains had stories about similar questions raised by care recipients. Interviewees reported times when patients and other care recipients were confused about the purpose that a nonreligious chaplain could serve. Kirt, a white man working in the southern region of the United States, explained how he perceived this confusion:

“I think in the state of where chaplaincy is right now in that we don’t have a single unified scope of practice in our field. We’re not licensed, at least not yet in our field. And those aspects become barriers in the sense that sometimes I’m pigeonholed by others, by colleagues or patients, to be here for religious care specifically. And so then the question is, well, if you’re not here for religious care, what are you here for?”

Chaplains provide spiritual care, and the assumption of many of Kirt’s patients is that spiritual care must be religious in nature. In fact, spiritual care can be either religious or nonreligious. Nonreligious chaplains felt themselves well equipped to provide both types of care, as they themselves exist with a nonreligious identity but have been trained in religious contexts.

Zee, an African American woman in the southern region of the United States, works in hospice chaplaincy. When she meets a patient, she explains her role, because even religious patients do not necessarily understand what a chaplain is or desire to interact with her:

“When I tell someone I’m a chaplain, I know it’s a loaded term. Sometimes that’s where people will get standoffish and say, well, I have a pastor. And I’ll tell them that that’s great. I’m not here to replace that person, but I’m here to provide you a safe space to share maybe what you’re feeling that you may not feel comfortable sharing with your pastor.”

Zee helps patients who are at the end of their lives connect to what they believe and what gives them comfort. Zee described what spiritual care can look like in her practice:

“The goal of what I’m doing is, trying to provide another avenue for people not only to express how they feel, but it’s also another way of expressing what they believe. That they believe in the goodness of that other person, that they believe in the love that they shared with that other person, or the experiences that they had. That’s another way of providing comfort, too. . . Sometimes we just have to have these moments where we can sit and be still and look at stones and look at pictures and hold these things and remember.”

Zee offers spiritual care that is grounded in what the recipient of care has experienced and believes about others, whether the patient is religious or nonreligious.

Claire, a white woman who is a second-career chaplaincy student on the west coast of the United States, described spiritual care succinctly. “You’re not trying to fix anything. You’re just trying to meet them where they are. So that’s it.” As an atheist, Claire finds no contradiction between spiritual care and her beliefs.

3.1.1. Working across Differences

Many nonreligious chaplains have been trained in religiously affiliated institutions and are thus immersed in traditions that are not their own. Having spent time as seminary students, unaffiliated chaplains have learned to translate nonreligious ideas into religious language and vice versa. From these experiences comes being comfortable with their knowledge about the values and beliefs they share with major world religions. As might

be expected, nonreligious chaplains are also comfortable connecting with care recipients in purely nonreligious terms.

Sometimes Sunil, a South Asian man working in the Midwest, introduces himself as a chaplain and is told that he is not what the patient was expecting. As a “brown man with a beard,” he is read as non-Christian, although not necessarily as nonreligious. Being told that he is unexpected opens a possibility for dialogue:

“I sometimes return that question to them, like, ‘What kind of chaplains were you expecting to meet?’ They give you a sense of what their understanding of a chaplain is and then I work with that. But the generic, if I have to respond, or when I do have to respond, I generically talk about somebody who is going to be here to listen to you and talk to you and somebody who’s comfortable working across different value systems and faith and religious and nonreligious traditions. That’s what I really start with.”

Cynthia, a white woman working in the Midwest region of the United States, finds it advantageous to be “spiritually independent” when she works with care recipients:

“All chaplains try to not walk in with assumptions about what people mean when they say a miracle or what they mean when they say Jesus, or all of these things that people say. But I think having a background that is kind of wide and not as connected to a particular tradition gives me a lot of space for that curiosity with people. . . So I think it allows me space to be really, really focused on what this individual person in front of me is presenting and what they need, and what their specific spiritual experience or practices or needs are, because it’s so unique.”

Kathy, another white woman working in the Midwest, described how it was important to hear from patients about their spiritual needs, but emphasized that the patient should not bear the burden of educating her.

“I know that as a chaplain, when I visit people of other faiths, there are times that I want to know enough to be able to meet their needs, but I have to be very careful about whether they are in that mode where they want to do education about their faith, because they’re not well and I can’t expect too much of them at that time.”

Kathy thus assumes the burden of being prepared to serve people from a wide variety of religious and spiritual backgrounds: “My goal is to try to meet that person where they are and pray in a way that’s helpful and comforting for them, or meets whatever the need is that’s arisen during the conversation that we’ve had.” Kathy is there to accompany, not proselytize.

Anya, a white woman working on the west coast of the United States, described herself as “open” and “positive”:

“I meet people where they are, and I’m open and very positive to all religious paths. I have a particular personal orientation, but. . . the same way somebody who’s an Evangelical could walk into a Muslim patient’s room and be their chaplain without sharing their own personal religious orientation, so can I.”

Anya identifies herself, in this respect, as a typical chaplain, equal in skill to any chaplain who works across difference. Anya also noted, however, that as a nonreligious chaplain,

“I’ll be able to meet people who don’t really identify as religious, or mainly not even identify as having any spirituality. I had a spiritual direction session with somebody like that. . . They found their happy place when they had been fishing with their parents when they were little, and that sitting quietly at the edge of a lake like that was really their happy place and where they got their grounding.”

As with Anya’s patient who found their “grounding” lakeside, many interviews revealed how care recipients connect their spirituality to the natural world—a resource that is available to religious and nonreligious chaplains alike. Anya, as a nonreligious

chaplain, felt particularly able to connect to this care recipient's source of meaning, which was outside of formal religious and spiritual traditions.

3.1.2. Serving All

Some nonreligious chaplains were surprised by the ease with which they were able to serve religious care recipients. Bronwen, a white woman working on the west coast of the United States, recalled: "I always remember my husband, who's atheist, the day before my first day of [clinical training], he said, 'You're going to have to pray.' I said, 'Yeah, I know. I'm okay. It's all right. I'll figure it out.'" Prayer, however, was never the challenge that Bronwen's husband anticipated it would be for her: "I'm very comfortable praying with patients. Always never been an issue for me, because my primary concern and my priority is to serve the patient's needs as a human being. And whatever their need and whatever their belief system, I'm willing to meet them."

Claire, the chaplaincy student, is completing her clinical pastoral education at a hospital that serves a "pretty conservative, very white, almost exclusively Christian demographic". Despite her status as a nonreligious chaplain, she does not find it difficult to serve a population that is very demographically different from her:

"Chaplaincy is so not about us as chaplains, right? It's about being able to be present with people, and what they need, and what their own worldview is. . . I had a patient who grabbed my hand and said, 'Oh, Jesus is so good. He's so good. Jesus saves all of us.' And I just said, 'Jesus is so good to you. You just really put all of your faith in Jesus.' You know what I mean? I don't have a place in that conversation. My own worldview, my own beliefs, doesn't have a place."

Sunil reported feeling that, on occasion, patients were able to be open with him specifically because he was outside their traditions and communities: "I am there present with as much kindness as I can, and which allows them just enough space to open up certain aspects of life they wouldn't open up with in their own identity-based communities or whatever." Sunil sees his "otherness" as one of his strengths as a spiritual caregiver.

3.2. Christian Normativity

Many nonreligious chaplains in the U.S. struggle with Christian normativity, which is the idea that Christian identity is natural and universally desirable (Joshi 2013, 2020). There is still a heavy expectation that the United States is a "Christian nation," and Christian normativity is present in many of the institutions where chaplains are trained and work, in the spoken and unspoken expectations that a chaplain will be a Christian and will provide Christian spiritual care. Nonreligious chaplains are affected by this expectation. As Cynthia, the "spiritually independent" chaplain, told us, "It comes out in the assumptions about what everybody thinks a chaplain is. Because on base level, people assume a chaplain is a Christian pastor who's going to pray with you. Let's be real."

3.2.1. Challenges in Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE)

Several respondents told us that they struggled throughout their theological education and clinical training due to their nonreligious identification. Their struggles related to institutions and curricula that were tailored to and focused on those pursuing ordination or other leadership within an established religious tradition. The stories of struggle were particularly evident in the respondents' experiences of clinical pastoral education (CPE). CPE is a field experience that closely imitates the practice of professional chaplaincy, and though required for many ordained ministers, is often considered the "bread and butter" of chaplaincy education (Cadge et al. 2019). Although CPE takes place in multifaith settings outside of the environment of theological schools, our respondents reported that their identities frequently presented more of a challenge in CPE than in their coursework in explicitly religious schools. These experiences in CPE sometimes foreshadowed how nonreligious chaplains would be received in the workplace.

Sunil felt isolated by the interpretive work he had to perform in CPE:

“When I started CPE, it was a lot of interpretive work that I had to do of everything that was taught, including language itself, even the language that we were taught. . . I had to interpret a lot into my own context, my own tradition, my own stories, and things like that. For some reason, I think I had higher hope of that would be less of a work that needs to be done when you come to the professional setting.”

One example that Sunil gave was the fact that he does not “come from a prayer tradition. . . I think it felt so far off of the traditions that I grew up with or anything that I was familiar with.” The burden of interpretive work fell on Sunil’s shoulders, because extemporaneous prayer is a normative part of Christianity in the United States.

Of her CPE education, Beall, a white woman working in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States, flatly stated, “I just didn’t fit into the traditional Christian-Judaic norms.” Beall found it challenging to connect with her supervisors and her CPE cohort, even as she herself used the Christian-normative construction of a “Judeo-Christian” tradition (Gaston 2013; Silk 1984).

One interview respondent reflected on how it was difficult for her to access CPE as a nonreligious chaplain. Melissa, a Native American woman in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States, completed her clinical training at a forensic mental health facility that was not a desirable CPE site. She suspected that she may have ended up at this difficult site because, trained as an interfaith chaplain, other jobs were not open to her.

“When I graduated, I couldn’t find a job because I didn’t fit into the mold of, I wasn’t a Christian chaplain. . . So it was really hard for me to find a job right out of [seminary]. . . [The hospital’s] program, because of the setting, was pretty easy to get into because people didn’t want to work there. So I applied.”

While chaplaincy in a forensic mental health hospital is important work, Melissa did the work not solely because of interest or aptitude, but because she perceived that her religious identity limited her options.

3.2.2. Challenges in the Workplace

Many interview respondents explained that they find themselves working with people who assume that “chaplain” is a Christian title. As Kevin, a white man working in the Midwest, told us, this is not an unreasonable assumption: “Most people would assume, by the virtue of me being a white, American, male chaplain, that I must be Christian, and statistics would be in their favor.” Joe, another white man in the Midwest, described himself as “easily mistake[n] . . . for literally any other Christian pastor”. But this does not make confronting Christian expectations easy, particularly when correcting a mistaken impression involves inviting hostility upon oneself as an “unbeliever”. Jason, who is a Black chaplain working in the southern United States, admitted, “I’m hoping that a family or a patient, they never ask me, ‘Hey, what church do you go to?’” As Jason is early in his career, he has not been asked this question yet, but he realizes that this is unlikely to remain the case.

Barbie faced pushback from both coworkers and care recipients for not fitting into a traditional religious mold—or, as she put it, “It does kind of feel like I’m kind of trying to press myself down into a little box.” Barbie encountered hostility during her most recent job search:

“I’ve come to find out rather than being identified as what I am, I have to defend why I’m not Christian. So example, in my fellowship interview at [a large academic medical center], the question was, so why aren’t you identifying as Christian? Rather than, what do you identify as? So I was immediately . . . having to defend to three Christians why I’m not a Christian. If I’m trying to have gainful employment, what a terrible way, what a terrible position to put me in, right?”

The fact that Barbie's potential employers were comfortable inquiring about her non-affiliation with the Christian religion is a particularly powerful example of Christian normativity.

Some nonreligious chaplains reported struggling to be seen as experts on chaplaincy by their coworkers. Sunil described how, at first, he was treated by his supervisor as someone who lacked the expertise to care for Christian patients:

"We contribute to the diversity of the room, but we're still not seen as one of the leading voices of the room. I think that's oftentimes very frustrating to me. If there's, let's say, a Christian patient who died and if there are two chaplains who need to be referred to for care, and this happens sometimes in my work, my manager used to be like, 'Oh, this person should go and respond to it because [my coworker is] Christian.'"

Sunil's experience describes how nonreligious chaplains in his workplace were previously considered extraneous. Even though Christian chaplains are expected to care for non-Christian patients, nonreligious chaplains are sometimes thought to be incapable of caring across difference.

Alongside these social discomforts, paperwork can also pose challenges. Pat, a white person who uses they/them pronouns and works in the western United States, noted that they find "charting" to be more difficult as a nonreligious chaplain. Charting refers to the practice of a chaplain entering information into a patient's medical record. As Pat explained:

"When I'm charting as a chaplain for patients, I have to be really careful about my language. Part of that is because I live in a dominant Christian society, like America, essentially. I wouldn't say in the chart 'prayed to Christian deity' or even not capitalizing the 'G' in 'God' because it might offend the other medical practitioners who are Christian. . . And so I just wanted to comment on that. Charting as a nonreligious or other-religious-person chaplain is very complicated."

Pat's experience indicates another way that Christian normativity works—in this case, as unstated assumptions about the nature of God.

3.2.3. Doubting Themselves

While the nonreligious chaplains we spoke with were confident of their callings as chaplains, some chaplain respondents discussed the doubt in themselves they had experienced as nonreligious chaplains.

Karen, a white woman working in the western region of the United States, remembered an uncomfortable experience in which her religious beliefs were questioned and she felt as though she had to soften the admission that she was nonreligious by sharing her religious background.

"[A patient] had asked me, 'Are you Christian?' And I said [to my supervisor], 'I hate that question,' and he pushed me to answer why. And in that situation where somebody asked me, 'Are you Christian?' my answer was, 'I was raised in the United Church of Christ and I went to a predominantly Methodist seminary. . . ' So I'm trying to apologize for [not being Christian]."

While this conversation could have been different—for example, an encounter about sharing the religious formation that a nonreligious chaplain experienced earlier in life, or about the chaplain's expertise in other traditions—Karen felt that she was somehow diminished in the exchange and that she needed to use her Christian background to "apologize" for her current nonreligious identity.

Jason felt that he was being held to a double standard when a patient's brother resisted his care:

"I did have a pastor call because his brother was in the hospital and he wanted a chaplain that was Baptist. And I said, 'Hey, I'm,' [and] introduced myself. And he asked me, what was my belief system? I said I was humanist. I was agnostic, because he had no idea what the humanist was. And he paused for four

or five seconds. And he gave me a whole spiel about the Romans' role and then salvation and all that good stuff. I just listened and I said, 'Okay, thank you. Do you want me...to get another chaplain that's able to provide the type of care that you desire?' And it was handled, but it did hurt. It did strike some frustration in me because it's perfectly okay for you to provide care for an agnostic and an atheist. But for some reason it's not okay for me to provide care for your brother."

In this case, Jason did what chaplains often refer to as "perform or provide". "Perform or provide" comes from the deeply pluralistic environment of the United States military (Stahl 2017), where chaplains of all religious traditions always have the option of either performing a service themselves or, if they are unable to do so for whatever reason, finding another way to provide the service. "Perform or provide" could be considered a chaplaincy norm, so Jason's frustration with it is noteworthy. While he accomplished his chaplaincy objective of providing spiritual care by another means, he nonetheless felt "hurt" that his identity was implicated.

4. Discussion

The very existence of nonreligious chaplains undercuts traditional assumptions about the jurisdiction of religion and the divide between the sacred and the secular. Not long ago, openly nonreligious spiritual care providers would have been impossible for many people to imagine, but today, nonreligious chaplains are becoming a part of the spiritual care landscape in the United States. Nonreligious chaplains also work in other countries where nonreligious spiritual care is more established, such as the Netherlands (Glasner et al. 2022), and in countries where nonreligious people make up a greater share of the population than they do in the U.S., such as the United Kingdom (Savage 2021). Yet, even in places where nonreligious chaplaincy is more established than it is in the United States, chaplaincy is still assumed to be "an inherently religious profession" (Schuhmann et al. 2021, p. 208).

The nonreligious chaplains we spoke with have a common understanding that the sacred is bigger and more inclusive than religion. At the same time, they have chosen to learn about religions and to use those lexicons to help others. Because nonreligious chaplains do not automatically equate the sacred with religion, they often think about beliefs and meanings as expansively as possible, practicing curiosity and openness with recipients of care, coworkers, and other chaplains. Thus, nonreligious chaplains are a rich case for studying religious pluralism and spiritual care in diverse societies because they disrupt assumptions about religious pluralism—both what religious pluralism is, and who is included.

We find that nonreligious chaplains have strong pluralistic skillsets and do not see themselves as chaplains solely to the nonreligious. Interestingly, the case for nonreligious chaplains is often grounded in the spiritual care needs of the nonreligious (Hunt 2022), but this was not a major theme in the interviews.

Despite ongoing changes and increasing inclusivity in spiritual care, our findings highlight the challenges of Christian normativity that remain. Nonreligious chaplains reported struggling against Christian-normative assumptions while in clinical training and in the workplace. Spiritual care remains a Christian-majority profession in many Western countries (Pesut et al. 2012). Nonreligious chaplains are not the first non-Christian group to encounter Christian normativity, yet they are a particularly fruitful case for scholarly investigation because there are few readily established nonreligious alternatives to Christian norms. For example, the military insignia for the U.S. Chaplain Corps in 1917 was a cross (Stahl 2017). The assumption that a cross can stand in to represent all religion is an example of Christian normativity that Jewish chaplains resisted. Negotiations between religious leaders inside and outside the military led to the creation of a tablet insignia for Jewish chaplains (ibid.). Nonreligious individuals have no such shared cultural capital. Today, there is no provision for nonreligious chaplains to serve in the U.S. military, but if there were, it is not clear what the insignia would be. The nonreligious identity such an insignia would reflect is still forming.

Nonreligious chaplains are educated, trained, and employed in settings with pre-existing Christian frameworks. Nonreligious spiritual care that does not fit into a Christian-normative framework is at risk of being rendered invisible because it is either not seen or not recognized as spiritual care by other chaplains, recipients of care, or institutions. Changing this perception will not only improve the working conditions of nonreligious chaplains but could potentially increase access to spiritual care by the ever-increasing population of nonreligious Americans.

One limitation of this study is that it focuses on nonreligious chaplains working in Christian contexts. Other religious minorities in those same contexts may have different experiences with Christian normativity, and religious normativity may present differently in non-Christian religious contexts. Future research is needed to attend to these possibilities.

We find that nonreligious chaplains feel that they have a great deal to offer spiritual care, including strong pluralistic skillsets and the honed ability to work across difference. The evidence we present suggests that it may be difficult to recognize and to cultivate those gifts within Christian-normative contexts such as seminaries and CPE sites, or even within professional chaplaincy as a whole. Further research is needed to understand how forms of spiritual care that are not Christian normative might be poorly understood or rendered invisible, and whether benefits from those forms of care are being denied to care recipients.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, A.L. and W.C.; methodology, A.L.; formal analysis, A.L. and A.A.; investigation, A.L.; writing—original draft preparation, A.L. and A.A.; writing—review and editing, W.C. and A.L.; project administration, A.L.; funding acquisition, W.C. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by The Fetzer Institute grant number 4187.02. The APC was funded by The Fetzer Institute.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and reviewed by the Institutional Review Board of Brandeis University (protocol code #22250R-E, 5 July 2022).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data is unavailable due to privacy restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Background

1. Can you start by telling me a little bit about how you came to your work as a chaplain?
2. What is your religious/(non)religious identity?
 - a. For how long have you been _____?
3. How did you come to work in the sector and setting where you work now?
 - a. Probe for role models/mentors

Work

1. At your work site, what is the environment like for nonreligious people?
 - a. What is it like for you as a chaplain?
2. Can you tell me about who you serve?
 - a. Probe for types of people served
 - b. Probe for demographics
3. Can you describe what your workload is like?
 - a. Walk me through a typical day or week
 - b. Are you called on to perform rituals? What do non/religious rituals look like in your work?
4. How many religiously unaffiliated chaplains, besides you, are there at your work site?

- a. How does this compare to chaplains of other religious identifications?
- b. Do you have a personal or professional network of religiously unaffiliated chaplains that you can rely on for support?
- c. How about support from chaplains with different religious beliefs than yours?
5. As a chaplain, what negative experiences, if any, have you had at your work site, related to your religious identification?
 - a. Probe for examples

Education

6. What has your educational journey to chaplaincy been like?
 - a. Probe for examples
7. In your chaplaincy education process, what ways, if any, have you experienced challenges because of your non-religious identification?
8. Have you had access to learning opportunities particularly designed for religiously unaffiliated chaplains?
 - a. How does the availability of these (non)religious-specific resources compare to those for chaplains with other religious identifications?
9. How do you think your training experiences compare to those of colleagues from other religious backgrounds?

Professional Development

10. What opportunities would you like to have as you develop in your career?
 - a. Do these opportunities relate specifically to your (non)religious commitments?
11. What are your perceptions of religious equity in chaplaincy opportunities, compensation, opportunity for advancement and promotion, retention?
 - a. Probe for examples of opportunities, compensation, advancement, promotion and retention separately
12. What are the most important things leaders in chaplaincy can do now to address barriers to religiously unaffiliated chaplaincy in the field?
 - a. Are these actions that can be taken by religious leaders or by the nonreligious (if unclear)?
13. How would, or do, you advise non-religious people considering entering spiritual care or chaplaincy?
14. Where would you like to see religiously unaffiliated chaplaincy be in the next ten years?

Conclusion

15. Overall, how do you think your experiences are different from those of religiously affiliated chaplains?
16. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences in the field of chaplaincy in relation to your religiously unaffiliated identification?

Note

- ¹ In the United States, Christian students are easily able to enroll in a seminary or divinity school that shares their faith identity and therefore spend their years of study learning about their own tradition. In recent years, more seminaries have welcomed nonreligious students (Weissman 2022), but nonetheless, nonreligious students often find themselves focusing their study on traditions to which they have no personal connection.

References

- Baker, Joseph O'Brian, and Buster Smith. 2009. None Too Simple: Examining Issues of Religious Nonbelief and Nonbelonging in the United States. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48: 719–33. [CrossRef]
- Cadge, Wendy, George Fitchett, Trace Haythorn, Patricia K Palmer, Shelly Rambo, Casey Clevenger, and Irene Elizabeth Stroud. 2019. Training Healthcare Chaplains: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow. *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 73: 211–21.
- Cadge, Wendy, Grace Tien, and Trace Haythorn. 2022. What Are Chaplains Learning? Perspectives on the Supply Side. A Working Paper. Brandeis University. Available online: <https://chaplaincyinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Cadge-et-al-What-are-chaplains-learning-2022.pdf> (accessed on 28 June 2023).
- Charmaz, Kathy. 2014. *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. Available online: <https://www.amazon.com/Constructing-Grounded-Introducing-Qualitative-Methods/dp/0857029142> (accessed on 7 September 2023).
- Gaston, K. Healan. 2013. The Cold War Romance of Religious Authenticity: Will Herberg, William F. Buckley Jr., and the Rise of the New Right. *Journal of American History* 99: 1133–58.

- Glasner, Tina, Carmen Schuhmann, and Renske Kruizinga. 2022. The Future of Chaplaincy in a Secularized Society: A Mixed-Methods Survey from the Netherlands. *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy* 29: 132–44. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Hunt, Katie. 2022. Non-Religious Prisoners' Unequal Access to Pastoral Care. *International Journal of Law in Context* 18: 116–31. [CrossRef]
- Joshi, Khyati Y. 2013. Standing Up and Speaking Out: Hindu Americans and Christian Normativity in Metro Atlanta. In *Asian Americans in Dixie: Race and Migration in the South*. Edited by Khyati Y. Joshi and Jigna Desai. The Asian American Experience. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, pp. 190–215.
- Joshi, Khyati Y. 2020. *White Christian Privilege: The Illusion of Religious Equality in America*. New York: New York University Press.
- Klitzman, Robert, Gabrielle Di Sapia Natarelli, Elizaveta Garbuzova, Stephanie Sinnappan, and Jay Al-Hashimi. 2022. When and Why Patients and Families Reject Chaplains: Challenges, Strategies and Solutions. *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy*. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Pesut, Barbara, Sheryl Reimer Reimer-Kirkham, Richard Sawatzky, Gloria Woodland, and Perry Peverall. 2012. Hospitable Hospitals in a Diverse Society: From Chaplains to Spiritual Care Providers. *Journal of Religion and Health* 51: 825–36. [CrossRef]
- Pew Research Center. 2022. Modeling the Future of Religion in America. Available online: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/> (accessed on 13 July 2023).
- Potts, Garrett, Sage Hewitt, Monica Moore, Alaina Mui, and Barbara Lubrano. 2023. Spiritual Caregiving and Assessments for America's Religious 'Nones': A Chaplaincy Perspective. *Journal of Religion and Health* 62: 1513–31. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Savage, David. 2021. The Development of Non-Religious Pastoral Support in the UK. *Religions* 12: 812. [CrossRef]
- Schuhmann, Carmen M., Joanna Wojtkowiak, R. Van Lierop, and Froukje Pitstra. 2021. Humanist Chaplaincy According to Northwestern European Humanist Chaplains: Towards a Framework for Understanding Chaplaincy in Secular Societies. *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy* 27: 207–21. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Silk, Mark. 1984. Notes on the Judeo-Christian Tradition in America. *American Quarterly* 36: 65–85. [CrossRef]
- Stahl, Ronit Y. 2017. *Enlisting Faith: How the Military Chaplaincy Shaped Religion and State in Modern America*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.
- Sullivan, Winnifred F. 2014. *A Ministry of Presence: Chaplaincy, Spiritual Care, and the Law*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tavory, Iddo, and Stefan Timmermans. 2014. *Abductive Analysis: Theorizing Qualitative Research*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Vernon, Glenn M. 1968. The Religious 'Nones': A Neglected Category. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 7: 219–29. [CrossRef]
- Weissman, Sara. 2022. Serving the Searching and the Secular. *Inside Higher Ed*. April 28. Available online: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/04/29/seminary-draws-nonreligious-students-social-justice> (accessed on 13 July 2023).

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.