

Article

The Pastoralised Imam: How Imams in Norway Counsel Youth and Families

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Abstract

In the research on Islam in Europe, the concept of ‘churchification’ has at times been used to refer to the transformation of mosques and Islamic organisations in the European context. Scholarship has often focused on the structural and institutional dimensions of change in Muslim communities, but less on the transformation of religious leadership. This article adds to this literature by examining how imams in Norway engage in counselling for youth and families. Drawing on qualitative in-depth interviews with eight imams in six Muslim congregations, I identify two broad orientations in counselling practice: a doctrine-centred approach that foregrounds religious accountability and eschatological motivation, and a relational-therapeutic approach that prioritises alliance-building, accompaniment, psychological framings, and, on occasion, referral to professional welfare services. I use these findings to enrich the concept of churchification. I propose that the concept of *pastoralisation* can describe important changes in the role of the imam in Europe: The adoption of a distinctively pastoral mode of religious leadership that centres on the personal needs of individual community members.

Keywords: imams; mosques; pastoral care; youth counselling; Islam in Norway; Islamic chaplaincy; religious authority; churchification of Islam

1. Introduction

The role of the imam in European Muslim communities has undergone substantial transformation over recent decades. Originally centred on leading prayer and providing basic religious instruction, the imam is today expected to perform a much broader range of functions. Scholars have described this process through concepts such as ‘churchification’ of mosques and Islamic leadership, pointing to the ways in which imam practice is being reshaped in the image of professionalised, pastorally active clergy, familiar from Protestant Christianity or Rabbinic Judaism in Europe. However, much of this scholarship has focused on the structural and institutional dimensions of role change rather than on the content of pastoral practice. How do imams actually counsel young people and their families? What kind of frameworks are they drawing on? And how do they navigate the tension between their authority as religious figures and the relational demands of working with adolescents who may be sceptical of authorities? These questions remain largely unexamined in the literature.

This article addresses that gap through qualitative in-depth interviews with imams and mosque leaders in Norway, conducted in late 2024. The interviews reveal that counselling practice varies along a meaningful axis: some respondents tended toward a doctrine-centred approach, invoking religious concepts of accountability, sin, and eschatological



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consequence to redirect youth behaviour or to encourage their parents. Others tended toward a more relational-therapeutic approach, emphasising alliance-building, psychological reframing, and on occasion referral to professional welfare services. All informants, however, demonstrated a reflective awareness of their institutional authority and treated that authority as a resource for their pastoral counselling work. I situate these findings in two bodies of literature: first, the growing scholarship on imams and mosques in Europe and the transformation of their role; and second, the emerging field of Islamic counselling and chaplaincy studies, which offers analytic categories relevant to the variation I observe. Drawing together these fields of study, I put forth the explorative analytical claim that we may be witnessing a *pastoralisation* of the role of the imam in Western Europe: the adoption of a distinctively pastoral mode of religious leadership, which centres on the personal, emotional, and relational needs of individual community members.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature and develops the analytical framework. Section 3 describes the study's methodology. Section 4 discusses the Norwegian context. Section 5 presents the empirical findings: the problems families and youth bring to imams; and the orientations to counselling among the imams. Sections 6 and 7 then introduce the concept of pastoralisation, how it relates to the broader literature on churchification, and how pastoralisation may relate to other modes of being an imam. Section 8 concludes and discusses implications for future research.

2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

2.1. Churchification and Professionalisation: The Expanding Role of the Imam in Europe

Research on Muslim communities in Europe has consistently documented an expansion and professionalisation of the role of the imam. In Sunni Islam, the notion of imam generally refers to the person who leads communal prayers. In Shi'a Islam, the concept of the imamate is vastly different and refers to leaders from the lineage of the Prophet Muhammad who are leaders of the whole Muslim community (Nasr 2016). In contemporary Europe, however, the concept of imam has often taken on a larger meaning. Imams—understood as religious leaders in mosques—frequently get tasked with representing the community to public institutions, mediating family and marital conflicts, supporting individuals in personal crisis, or working with young people who are at risk of social marginalisation (Brekke et al. 2022; Hough et al. 2021; Jouanneau 2013; Vinding et al. 2018).

Various concepts have been developed to describe this process. The concept of churchification has been used to refer to the broader organisational tendency of Muslim congregations to adopt forms of institutional life—regular communal gathering, stable leadership, formal individual membership in mosques, programmatic activities—that mirror the congregation model familiar from protestant Christianity (Nielsen 2018; Vinding 2018). Others have talked about understanding mosques or Islamic associations through a *congregational* analytic lens, where “people are doing religion together” in a relational way—distinguished from the traditional function of a mosque as primarily being a site for prayer (Ahmed 2020). In such a setting, the responsibilities of imams and other mosque leaders may turn in a pastoral and relational direction. Others have used the term professionalisation, where the imam becomes a distinct profession—with certain professional duties, a distinct training, and perhaps a distinct professional ethos (Hough et al. 2021; Jouanneau 2013; Trucco and Dehbi 2024).

These processes are visible across Western contexts. In countries as diverse as the United Kingdom, France, Switzerland, and Germany, studies have documented imams being called upon to perform hospital visits, mediate marital disputes, engage with social workers and police, serve as community spokespersons in the media, and participate in counter-extremism programmes (Birt 2006; Ceylan 2010; Hough et al. 2021; Jouanneau 2013;

Schmid 2020). Norwegian research confirms these patterns: Brekke et al. (2022) and Døving (2012) have described Norwegian imams as operating under expectations that substantially exceed the traditional functions of the role.

One area that remains comparatively underexplored is the specific practice of imam-led counselling with young people or parents who have questions about parenting the youth. While the role of imams or mosque leaders in counter-extremism and deradicalisation towards youth has attracted scholarly and policy attention (Ostwaldt 2025; Vellenga and De Groot 2019), the more everyday dimensions of imam involvement in youth and family guidance have received little systematic study.

2.2. Varieties of Islamic Counselling

A parallel literature in the study of religious counselling and chaplaincy offers conceptual resources which can be useful for analysing the variation in imam practice when engaging with youth or families. The literature on Islamic or Muslim chaplaincy and counselling has been characterised as “emergent”—but it is rapidly growing (Baig and Isgandarova 2023; Gilliat-Ray et al. 2024; Şahinöz 2018). As a term, chaplaincy refers to the employment of personnel at public institutions who are to provide spiritual, existential or psychosocial care and support. Originally, this referred to Christian clergy who were employed at public institutions such as hospitals, prisons, or the military to provide religious support. In recent decades, the notion of chaplaincy or spiritual care has expanded (Grung 2023). Secular humanists as well as adherents of other faiths have been employed as chaplains in public institutions across the Western world, even though this tendency is more pronounced in some places than in others. During the last two or three decades, Muslims have also entered the field, and concepts such as Islamic chaplaincy, Muslim chaplaincy, Islamic spiritual care, and Islamic pastoral care have been born (Ağilkaya-Şahin 2024; Baig and Isgandarova 2023; Gilliat-Ray et al. 2016; Gilliat-Ray et al. 2024; Long and Ansari 2018).

Given that the main activity within Islamic chaplaincy or pastoral care is an encounter between an Islamic chaplain or counsellor and an individual seeking care or counsel, the quality or characteristics of this encounter have received more scrutiny in the literature on chaplaincy and counselling than in the more general literature on imams and Islamic authority in the West. The emergent literature on Islamic chaplaincy has so far mostly not explored internal variations within Islamic chaplaincy and pastoral care: What are the different ways or modes in which Islamic chaplains or counsellors approach the people they engage with? Within the more established literature on chaplaincy in general and Christian chaplaincy in particular, scholars have developed analytical distinctions that identify variation in the practice of chaplaincy and pastoral care. Some of these analytical distinctions map productively onto the empirical findings in this article. In a study of both Christian and Muslim hospital chaplains in Norway, Beret Bråten distinguished between different modes of providing chaplaincy or spiritual care (Bråten 2023). Inspired by the Norwegian pastoral theologian Berit Okkenhaug, she distinguished between directive and non-directive modes of pastoral care: “A directive approach means that the counsellor takes the lead and acts as an adviser or teacher, while a non-directive approach is client or person-centred: The counsellor is supposed to be non-judgmental, genuine, and more concerned about the client’s perception of the problem than of the problem per se” (ibid., pp. 40–41). A similar distinction can be found in an article by Gé Speelman on how Christian pastoral care has been conceptualised in the Netherlands (Speelman 2023, pp. 40–41). She refers to Ruard Ganzevoort and Jan Visser, who made a four-fold typology of pastoral care in an influential Dutch book on the topic (Ganzevoort and Visser 2018). *Kerygmatic care* refers to the Greek word *kerygma*, proclamation. This kind of pastoral care foregrounds the Christian doctrinal message. *Therapeutical pastoral care*, on the other hand, foregrounds the individual problems

of the client. *Inter-human pastoral care* is also primarily oriented towards the person seeking care but foregrounds the caregiver as a companion or friend rather than an authority or therapist. Finally, a fourth type of pastoral care can combine elements from the other three modes. Other scholars working in the field of chaplaincy studies—both Islamic and non-Islamic—have highlighted concepts like *presence* or *accompaniment*, which is implicitly or explicitly held up as an ideal (Abdul Majid and Laird 2023; Adams 2019).

In the limited but growing empirical research on Islamic chaplaincy, spiritual care or counselling, traces of all these approaches can be found, even though conceptual distinctions between various modes of Islamic counselling remain underdeveloped. In their pioneering book on Muslim chaplaincy in the UK, Gilliat-Ray, Mansur and Pattison find evidence of both proclamative/kerygmatic and therapeutic approaches to pastoral Islamic care (Gilliat-Ray et al. 2016, pp. 115 and 206). In Bråten's article on hospital chaplains in Norway, she also noted that the Muslim chaplains she interviewed had a more directive approach to chaplaincy than the Christian chaplains—possibly because they were not full-time employees of the institution and therefore assumed a different role (Bråten 2023, p. 50). In studies from Germany and the US, however, Muslim chaplains appear as committed to a non-directive ideal of chaplaincy as their Christian counterparts (Abdul Majid and Laird 2023; Ağilkaya-Şahin 2024).

2.3. Analytical Framework

Drawing these two bodies of literature together, this article proposes an analytical framework that connects structural role transformation with the interactional dynamics of counselling practice. The concept of churchification captures the institutional pressures that expand the imam's role beyond liturgical functions toward congregation-based activity. Within this structural context, I propose that the concept of pastoralisation can be used to describe the resulting shift in the register of religious leadership—toward attending to the personal, emotional, and relational needs of individuals. Within this framework, I take inspiration from the counselling modes that have been described in the chaplaincy literature and describe both a doctrine-centred and a relational-therapeutic counselling orientation among imams. These categories function as exploratory analytical orientations rather than as a fixed typology. They are not mutually exclusive categories into which individual imams can be sorted, nor a spectrum on which respondents are permanently located. These concepts are used to identify patterns in how imams navigate counselling encounters. As the empirical analysis demonstrates, individual imams may draw on both orientations, shifting between doctrinal and relational registers depending on context, audience, and the problem at hand.

3. Methods and Ethics

Most of the material in the study is based on qualitative in-depth interviews with eight imams affiliated with Muslim Dialogue Network (MDN), one of the two Islamic umbrella organisations for mosques and Muslim organisations in Norway, for a study they commissioned on family counselling in their mosques. I included both formally titled imams and informal mosque leaders who occupy recognised positions of religious authority in the mosque and invest substantial work in their communities. Even these non-formal leaders have at times been labelled as imams by members in their congregation. For the sake of simplicity, I will therefore refer to all the informants in the article as imams.

Recruitment initially proceeded through MDN, whose executive director provided contact information for potential participants in October 2024. To protect anonymity, I did not report back to MDN which individuals were ultimately interviewed. I then contacted additional mosques without using MDN's executive director as an intermediary. Where

quotations risk identifying a respondent, identifying details have been removed. The MDN member organisations represent diverse ethno-national backgrounds: two Balkan-origin mosques (Bosnian and Albanian), one Moroccan, one Pakistani, and one Arab-dominated congregation, as well as a broader network of affiliated mosques that include a Shia mosque. This diversity shaped the sampling strategy: I aimed to include representatives from mosques of varying size, from both Oslo and smaller cities, and spanning the main regions of origin represented in MDN—the Balkans, Pakistan, the Middle East, and North Africa.

I initially planned twelve to thirteen interviews across a pool of approximately thirty mosques, but logistical constraints—including illness and travel among participants—reduced the final sample to eight interviews with representatives of six Muslim congregations, interviewed from October to December 2024. In the end, all the imams I interviewed were from Sunni mosques—hence the unqualified use of the term imam in this article. Most of them were employed full-time as imams in their mosques, but some were also employed part-time or were volunteering as imams or congregational leaders. Participants have been assigned pseudonyms (Khaled, Mohamed, Usman, Vasil, Davud, Hamza, Harun, and Ali) reflecting naming conventions from their respective regions of origin. All respondents are men. Interviews were semi-structured, guided by a topic outline and supplemented with follow-up questions. Sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed using *Autotekst*, an AI-assisted transcription service operated by the University of Oslo, yielding mostly accurate transcripts, which were then lightly corrected manually.

To contextualise the boundaries of the findings, I also draw on two expert interviews with administrative mosque leaders, conducted in autumn 2025 for a separate study on educational programmes for religious leaders in Norway. These informants occupy positions that give them extensive networks across multiple mosques. They were involved in recruiting participants to the programmes and interact regularly with imams both in their own and in other mosques. Rather than treating them as respondents about their own practice, I treat them as key informants—that is, as observers positioned to comment on institutional patterns across the field. Their value lies not in describing what happens inside counselling sessions (which they do not observe), but in offering a structural perspective on variation in how imams relate to their congregations. I use their accounts to discuss the limitations of the data and interview material I had access to.

Given that Islam is a sensitive topic in public debate, an essential ethical requirement in the study was to ensure anonymity for the participants. All interview quotations were anonymised, and I took care not to publish any information that could lead to identification of the persons I interviewed. Furthermore, informed consent was essential. Before starting the interview, I explained to the participants the goal of the research project and their role as participants. I made it clear that they had the right to not answer any questions they did not want to answer, and that they had the right to withdraw at any stage, should they wish to do that. I also explained how they would be anonymised during the research project.

A further methodological and ethical consideration concerns the funding arrangements for this study. Part of the data collection was commissioned and funded by MDN, the umbrella organisation to which the participating mosques had an affiliation. The literature on research ethics has established the risk of funding effects: the possibility that researchers may, consciously or otherwise, skew their findings in directions favourable to the commissioning body. But it is equally well established that such effects are not automatic: independent and critical research is possible even when external funders have a stake in the outcome (Krimsky 2013). Several safeguards were put in place to protect the independence of this study. The research was conducted under the institutional auspices of the Fafo Research Foundation. A condition of the project from Fafo's side was that the

findings would be published independently, with the institute retaining ownership of the data. A final methodological challenge in the study is the possibility of an interviewer effect. As a non-Muslim researcher affiliated with majority-society institutions, I may have inhibited answers that respondents felt would be perceived as politically incorrect. To address this, I took care to ask questions in an open-ended and non-judgmental way, and to build trust through the interviews so that the informants would talk more freely.

The data collection, coding, and analysis were done in an iterative and mostly inductive way. Prior to embarking on the data collection, I did not have a clear idea about what I would find, as there was not much research on the topic, neither in Norway nor in other European countries. In the initial interviews, a few important and unexpected topics emerged. I had not expected, for example, that the imams would engage so much in counselling dealing with youth and youth issues. I therefore fine-tuned the interview guides to get more information on those very topics. The coding was done manually, aiming to identify common thematic patterns in the interviews.

An initial report was published in Norwegian in 2025 (Elgvin 2025), and the report on the educational programmes for religious leaders was published in Norway in 2026 (Elgvin and Bårten 2026). The present article draws on the same data but expands on the findings and places them within a larger analytical framework. Both the initial report and this article were written independently of MDN.

4. Imams, Churchification and Pastoralisation in the Norwegian Context

The Islamic context in Norway may be particularly interesting when studying processes of churchification or pastoralisation among mosques and imams. Islam in Norway is probably more churchified than in several other European countries, even though the Muslim community in Norway is relatively small. There are 254 registered religious congregations in Norway which, based on their names, can be inferred to be Islamic, with 197,390 members (Elgvin and Bøe 2027). This amounts to 3.52 percent of the Norwegian population. There are also people who regard themselves as Muslims, but who are not members of a mosque. The upper bound for the percentage of Muslims in Norway is in any case not more than 5 percent. Even though the Muslim community in Norway is small, it has become highly institutionalised. The Norwegian state provides funding to mosques and other faith congregations, proportional to how many members they have. This is required by law and has to do with Norway's history of having independent churches alongside the Church of Norway, which was the state church until 2012 (KUF 1995; Schmidt 2015). This funding comes with some institutional strings attached. The mosques need to make an annual report to the authorities, where they detail how they used this funding. They also need to commit to "working towards" at least 40 percent representation of both genders in their governing bodies, without this being an absolute requirement.

As a result, mosques in Norway have become fairly church-like—if one takes the modern protestant congregation or church as the model—in their institutional make-up. The mosques have strong financial incentives in enrolling people as formal members, making mosques membership-based congregations. Mosques also have democratically elected boards, making mosques into a site for deliberation. As a result of the funding, most of the mosques are also able to provide salaries to imams, either full-time or part-time. In addition, Norway has maintained a long tradition of interfaith and intercultural dialogue, both between leaders of faith communities and between faith communities and authorities, where the Church of Norway has been one of the most important interlocutors (Brottveit et al. 2015; Elgvin 2023; Horsfjord 2013; Opsal 2013). This dialogue has provided imams and mosque leaders with much exposure to ways of thinking both in the Church of Norway and among leaders in other faith communities. Previous research has therefore proposed

that churchification may be a particularly fitting category for describing organised Islam in Norway (Mårtensson and Eriksen 2014). How these processes of churchification have affected the role of the imam, however, has not been described in detail yet.

5. Findings

This part provides an overview of the empirical findings. I begin by outlining why parents and youth come to the imam, before describing how the imams describe their own orientation in counselling practice.

5.1. What Brings Families and Youth to the Imam?

Without exception, all respondents identified parental guidance—particularly around adolescent children—as a central part of their work. The problems families brought forth were, for the most part, recognisable to any practitioner working with young people regardless of religious context: drugs, involvement in criminal environments, and signs of depression or withdrawal. Only a minority of contacts concerned specifically religious dilemmas, such as whether children should be permitted to attend school visits to churches, participate in overnight class trips, or swim in mixed-gender groups.

The respondents had not been frequently approached by parents seeking help to enforce religious observance or restrict their children's behaviour—the kind of dynamic sometimes discussed in public discourse in Norway under the heading of “negative social control.” A few imams mentioned receiving occasional requests of this kind, but the prevailing picture was different. As Usman put it,

It mostly concerns parents who are worried their children will end up on the outside. I think these actually are quite ordinary problems that people can have anywhere, whether they are Muslim or not.

Vasil offered the most structurally grounded account of why families struggled. He pointed to a combination of parental resource deficits and broader social conditions—inequality, the drug economy, and social media—as creating pressure on young people:

Parents often struggle to understand what their role is in today's society. Far too often I see them withdrawing. They don't know the reality their children inhabit, and so they don't know how to handle it . . . And young people see enormous wealth around them. They see people on YouTube taking holidays at luxury hotels in Dubai. They can't accept that everyone else is succeeding while they are not. The job market is hard for them, and maybe they face racism too. And the easy way out becomes petty crime or drifting into environments where that's a possibility.

Vasil distinguished himself among the informants in the importance he placed on structural and political factors. Other informants focused more on parenting dynamics and individual family circumstances. Davud described a case in which he felt that his role as an imam reached its limits: a young girl brought by her mother, eight or nine years old, who was clearly distressed. Her situation involved parental separation, poverty, and repeated house moves. His response was to consult a psychologist by telephone first, and then refer the family to professional services:

This was clearly something beyond what an imam like me could help with. So I told the mother that she needed to seek professional help from the health services. She needs to get someone who could follow them up properly. But there are other cases that are simpler, where I can come in as imam and give some advice to the parents. It varies enormously.

Khaled, meanwhile, did receive requests for specifically religious guidance—on questions such as whether children may visit a church or swim in mixed-gender pools—and

described his approach as often being reassuring rather than restrictive: “Visiting a church is not a problem, for example, to say that visiting a church is wrong is just a prejudice.”

Most of the imams—but not all—also described working directly with young people. This could take the form of youth meetings in the mosque or meeting distressed youngsters on demand of the parents.

5.2. The Imam’s Authority as a Counselling Resource

Previous research on imams in Norway has found that many feel they wield less influence than is commonly attributed to them—particularly outside the mosque walls (Brekke et al. 2022; Døving 2012). The present study suggests a more nuanced picture. While none of the respondents spoke assertively about their authority, most were clearly aware of it. They rather treated it as a professional resource and felt a sense of responsibility in how they managed it. Authority was not something they denied—it was something they handled carefully. The interviews nevertheless indicated that authority functioned differently with parents and with the youth. With parents, authority often seemed to be a given. With young people, authority was something that needed to be cultivated.

This dynamic was illustrated particularly well in the interview with Vasil, the imam in the sample who most frequently encountered families struggling with adolescent children. When asked why people came to him, he reflected that

I’m the imam, after all [laughs]. People trust me—mostly those who are religious and have a connection to the mosque. But among those who love the mosque, being the imam does carry authority. Though when families come to me, it’s often mainly with the parents that I really have authority.

When asked whether young people also trusted him, Vasil was candid about the limits of his standing with that group:

My authority probably lies more with the adult generations. Young people generally don’t have . . . how should I put it, much of a sense of authority, really. Or it’s often something that feels very distant to them. Since they get information and all kinds of knowledge from the internet . . . For them, all the stars and real authority figures in their life exist far away. From footballers to musicians, scholars, famous sheikhs and so on—it’s something that happens somewhere else. And then there’s me, you know, just the local imam. So there’s not much of an experience of authority in that moment. I understand that.

Yet Vasil was equally clear that this did not make him inconsequential. His response to the gap in authority was relational investment rather than resignation:

But I’m not saying I’m nobody. There is some respect among young people. Of course there is. But I don’t want to be some distant authority figure for them. First and foremost, I want to build human relationships. I want to be there with them. And there are many I’ve known since they were children. Now I’m sitting here looking like an imam—but you should see me on Saturday when I’m playing football with them, or getting worked up over video games with some of the guys on Friday evenings . . . I hate losing at video games, even when I’m playing against 16-year-olds [laughs]. My wife says I’m a sore loser. But yes—if I’ve managed to build those kinds of relationships over time, it sometimes happens that they’ll listen to me more than to their own parents.

Vasil’s account captures a tension that ran through several of the interviews: a simultaneous awareness of institutional authority and a deliberate effort to soften it. His strategy was not to present himself as a remote religious figure, but to become a familiar presence. Yet his own summary is telling: “I’m not saying I’m nobody.” Authority was not absent—it was cultivated through proximity.

For other imams, the authority was more straightforwardly acknowledged. Khaled described the weight his words carried almost as a matter of course:

Of course they listen to me. I am the imam, after all—you can't get away from that. So if I've said something, people do respect it. They don't always follow through, of course. That's just how people are, you don't always manage to do what you intend. But I almost never experience people telling me they don't trust what I say.

Across the interviews, a consistent pattern emerged: the respondents spoke of themselves with a degree of humility, yet it was evident to all of them that people came seeking their help precisely because the role of the imam carried authority. What varied was not the awareness of that authority, but the style in which it was exercised.

5.3. Orientations in Counselling Practice

When it came to the substance of their guidance, the practice of the informants varied along a dimension which resembles the distinctions that have been made in the chaplaincy and counselling literature, between directive or non-directive (Bråten 2023), or kerygmatic/proclamative vs. therapeutic (Speelman 2023). In my interview material, the clearest distinction was between an orientation centred on religious observance and moral accountability, and another drawing more heavily on psychological and relational frameworks. I will label these orientations to counselling as *doctrine-centred* and *relational-therapeutic*. These orientations are not fixed types or a spectrum on which individual imams are permanently located, but exploratory tendencies that capture patterns in how imams draw on a wider repertoire of counselling approaches. Individual imams may gravitate toward one tendency or the other depending on context and may shift between them.

Among those closer to the doctrine-centred orientation, Khaled provided the clearest examples when he spoke about his encounters with parents and youth. When young people were going off-track, his response was to direct them toward Islamic concepts of accountability and the afterlife:

I tell them that the most important thing as Muslims is God-consciousness—taqwa. A day will come when we all return to our Creator and answer for everything we have done. So belief in the Day of Judgement is something of a medicine when we are discussing serious matters. If I hear that a young person has been involved in crime, I say: Are you not afraid of the Judgement? Are you not afraid of how what you are doing will affect your life afterwards? And I also tell him to think about his parents, his siblings—he cannot only think about himself.

This doctrine-centred approach—invoking eschatological consequences to redirect behaviour—corresponds to a directive or kerygmatic approach in the chaplaincy literature. The religious authority speaks from a position of doctrinal knowledge to correct conduct and realign the individual with religious norms. What Khaled did was to *exhort*: to strongly encourage and compel, using symbolically laden religious language.

Vasil's stories about his encounters illustrate a contrasting orientation. A revealing episode occurred when parents came to him convinced their child was possessed by a jinn—a term for spirits in Islamic tradition. Rather than engaging with the supernatural framing, Vasil used his religious authority to reframe the problem in psychological and medical terms:

My role is then to tell them: no, that is not a jinn. That is about ordinary psychological problems. Or drug use. I once visited a family who complained that their son had become distant. They believed a jinn was drawing him away into the spirit world. I had to shake them out of it. I asked gently at first—could it be something else? Had their son ever used drugs? No, no, never, not their son, they assured me. Then I had to be direct. I used

my authority as imam. I said: I have seen many young people who use cannabis. The way you describe your son, it sounds exactly like someone who uses cannabis. All the signs fit perfectly. And as for jinns—I am the expert on jinns, I am the imam and I know everything about jinns [laughs loudly]. If I tell you it is not a jinn, you need to believe me! I don't usually take that tone, I need to emphasise that, but I felt I needed to get them to see reality.

The family subsequently sought professional support within a week of Vasil's visit, and the son was enrolled in a rehab programme. The episode is analytically significant on several levels. Vasil's counselling drew on no religious content in the conventional sense—his advice was substantively identical to what a social worker or psychologist might offer, in terms of his recommendation—to seek treatment. Yet it was precisely his religious authority that made the intervention possible. His standing as imam gave him the credibility to challenge a supernaturalist explanation and redirect parental attention toward a more tangible reality. He mobilised religious authority in the service of a therapeutic outcome.

While Vasil and Khaled represented contrasting tendencies—with a focus on religious observance, judgment/salvation and doctrinal responsibility on one side, and relationships and therapeutic intervention on the other—several imams could draw on both repertoires. Mohamed explained that when speaking to a boy who was in danger of getting drawn into crime, what he did first was to listen—in an open-ended and non-judgmental way. He then adapted his tone to what he thought would work.

If I am talking to a youngster who seems to be receptive to that, I might talk about his obligation to his parents—he should not do petty crime, they had raised him, no, how would that make them feel? But what if he has a difficult relationship to his parents? If I sense a concern with God, I might talk about the day of judgment. But if there is nothing there, no concern with parents and not with God and eternity? Then I will need to listen for a while and see what he has to say. Maybe I will find a way in after all.

In this quotation, Mohamed—who had no formal training in chaplaincy or counselling—nevertheless displays a practical know-how of how to adapt his counselling to the person he was talking to. The end goal was, in one sense, clearly “directive”—to avoid the youngster falling into a life of petty crime—but the approach was relational. Religious or familial obligations were utilised as possible resources in the counselling, but they were not the only resources available to him. Mohamed clearly aimed at accompanying the youngsters he was interacting with—being there with them and adapting his message to what could work in the various situations he encountered. Doctrinal exhortation based on his authority as imam was then a register he could employ—but he could also employ other registers, if he thought the situation called for that.

5.4. A Shared Commitment to Alliance over Coercion

Despite the variation in counselling orientation, one finding cut across the entire sample: all respondents, regardless of how doctrine-centred or therapeutically oriented their guidance was, emphasised that parents must work through relationship and warmth rather than compulsion. Several respondents held theologically conservative positions on questions such as interfaith marriage or sexual practice. Yet they were consistent in arguing that conservative norms should not be enforced on children through psychological or physical pressure.

This emphasis cuts across the doctrine-centred and relational-therapeutic orientations described above: Khaled invoked the Day of Judgement, but he did not endorse parental force; Vasil built rapport through football and video games and made the same point from a different angle. All participants thus relied on, in the language of contemporary pedagogy, *alliance-building*. The imams who held theologically conservative views—critical,

for instance, of homosexuality or marriage between Muslims and non-Muslims—were nevertheless consistent in arguing that such conservative norms were not something parents should impose on their children through coercion.

In several interviews, I put this to the test by presenting hypothetical scenarios. When Usman was asked what he would say to parents whose son had openly declared he no longer wanted to be a Muslim, he responded:

The first thing to say is that they must talk together. Always. That is the first thing. You must communicate. And show respect for one another. I usually say that you should always start with yourself before pointing at others. The parents should work on praying more themselves, becoming better Muslims, and showing their son in that way what Islam is about. Not coming at him with pointed fingers.

When pressed on what should happen if that approach failed, Usman was emphatic:

What is also important then is that you must always keep the lines open. Never break contact. There are some parents who think that if their children bring shame on the family, they will cut ties. I say no, no, never, never! They must not do that! Of course, both they and I hope that the son will come back to Islam. It is not only about his life now, but also about the Day of Judgement and eternal life. But breaking contact—that is the worst thing you can do. They will always be his parents regardless. They must remember that.

As discussed in the methodology section, the fact that I as a researcher am non-Muslim and may be identified with a largely non-Muslim majority society may have affected how the imams answered my questions. This caveat notwithstanding, the emphasis on non-coercive guidance was a consistent and recurring tendency across the interviews, and for several of the imams it appeared to reflect a considered pedagogical position rather than a merely strategic response. The most effective way to guide young people toward the right path, in their view, was not through compulsion but through kindness and personal example.

Some may argue that the very fact that imams use their authority as religious leaders to guide people in certain directions represents a form of coercion. Persuasion and moral authority, however, should be distinguished from coercion. The imams used their authority as a counselling resource. They did not have any means to enforce their authority, however—they did not and could not intervene if people decided not to heed their advice.

6. The Churchification of Islam in Europe and the Pastoralisation of the Imam Role

The findings of this study may help us to refine the theoretical vocabulary used to describe change among imams and Islamic congregations in Europe. The concept of churchification has drawn attention to the structural and organisational pressures on Muslim communities and their leaders: the expectation that mosques will function as congregations, that imams will be professionally trained, and that religious leadership will be exercised in ways acceptable to European publics (Ahmed 2020; Nielsen 2018; Vinding 2018). This concept captures important developments. But the developments that have been described in the literature so far are primarily structural—they describe the “form” of the role of the imam and the mosque, rather than its “content”. In principle, the process of churchification can refer to different kinds of processes—as churches, of course, are varied kinds of entities with differences between them. My findings point toward a precise and specific tendency within the larger process of churchification, which I label the *pastoralisation* of the role of the imam. This concept is more precise: It directs our gaze towards a specific type of role change among imams.

The concept of pastoralisation means the adoption of a distinctively pastoral mode of religious leadership: one that centres on the personal, emotional, and relational needs of individual community members. This kind of religious leadership partly works through sustained one-to-one or small group relationships and draws on psychological as well as religious frameworks. This pastoral mode is familiar from the history of Christian ministry in Europe, where it has been a defining feature of the priest's or pastor's role—at least during the last couple of centuries, but probably longer (McNeill 1951; Speelman 2023). It is, however, substantially less characteristic of the traditional imam role in Muslim-majority contexts.

In the Sunni tradition, the imam's primary function has often been seen as liturgical: leading communal prayer, delivering the Friday sermon, and providing religious instruction (Frégosi 2004, p. 137). These functions are quite different from the individualised, psychologically oriented counselling I observed among the participants in this study. Up until the 20th century, it was also the case in many Muslim countries that being an imam was not a fixed position or a regulated profession as such. In one of the earliest ethnographic accounts of a Muslim society by a European orientalist, the thorough *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* by Edward William Lane (first published in 1836), Lane made an explicit comparison between the role of the imam and that of Christian clergy: "The condition of the Imams is very different, in most respects, from that of Christian priests. They have no authority above other persons, and do not enjoy any respect but what their reputed piety or learning may obtain for them; nor are they a distinct order of men set apart for religious offices, like our clergy, and composing an indissoluble fraternity; for a man who has acted as the Imam of a mosque may be displaced by the warden of that mosque, and, with his employment and salary, loses the title of Imam, and has no better chance of being again chosen for a religious minister than any other person competent to perform the office. The Imams obtain their livelihood chiefly by other means than the service of the mosque, as their salaries are very small" (Lane 1860, pp. 82–83). Lane's book, however, as well as other ethnographic accounts of Muslim societies from the modern or early modern period, do hint that pastoral duties and assignments were performed by other types of Muslim religious personnel. Leaders in Sufi movements, in particular, seem to have maintained a pastoral role towards their "flock" or even the wider society they were part of (Evans-Pritchard 1945; Gellner 1969; Lane 1860, pp. 240–46).

Crucially, however, the type of Muslim religious personnel who have found employment in Western countries in recent decades are not Sufi or community leaders like the *pirs* from South Asia or the *marabouts* from North Africa. Given the institutionalisation of the mosque in Muslim diaspora groups, it is rather the figure of the imam who has become the paradigmatic religious leader among Muslim communities in the West. Many of these imams still receive their training and education in Muslim countries, where the role of imam is often different.

It must nevertheless be emphasised that many Muslim countries, through the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, made being an imam into a more institutionalised profession than was the case when Lane wrote his account from Egypt in the 1830s. Several states across the Muslim world, from Morocco to Turkey to Malaysia and Indonesia, encouraged the creation of hierarchical Islamic institutions where imams are either state employees or work in organisations that are heavily regulated by the state (Bruce 2018; Zeghal 2024). At the same time, ethnographic and scholarly accounts from Muslim countries have continued to depict imams as occupying rather limited roles (Bjelica 2025; Lyon 2004, pp. 221 and 281). Research from the UK from the 1990s and early 2000s also depicted the role of many imams as being "minimal" (Lewis 2011, pp. 180–81). My claim is not, however, that no imams ever engage in pastoral care in Muslim-majority contexts. That would be a bizarre claim, given

the huge diversity among Muslim societies and Islamic institutions worldwide. But it is safe to say that there still exists a *tendency* towards a more liturgical or restricted role for imams in Muslim-majority contexts.

Most imams in this study, however, were spending large amounts of time doing activities which went far beyond their liturgical duties. They were engaging in sustained relationships with families and youth, navigating emotional dynamics between parents and children, occasionally reframing supernaturalist beliefs in psychological terms, and sometimes making referrals to professional welfare services. The concept of pastoralisation captures an important dimension of this process: that the relational and emotional work of pastoral care is becoming an integrated part of what it means to be an imam.

We need to be precise about what the concept of pastoralisation does and does not imply. It does not imply secularisation: the imams in the study do not cease to be religious authorities when they counsel families. Their religious standing is, as I have argued, central to the effectiveness of their counselling. Nor does it imply a wholesale adoption of secular psychological frameworks: even the most therapeutically oriented of the respondents retained a distinctly Islamic framing. Nor does it imply a “Christianisation”, even though pastoral care is a concept coming out of the Christian tradition. The imams in the study remain fully anchored within Islamic religious frameworks. What it does imply is a shift in the register of religious leadership—from the primarily liturgical register toward a register that is more attentive to the emotional and relational needs of persons and families.

The larger concept of pastoralisation encompasses both orientations to pastoral care discussed in the article. The doctrine-centred orientation remains closer to the classical register of imams, where delivering a sermon (“khutba”) on Friday prayers is expected: it deploys religious concepts to redirect behaviour. The relational-therapeutic orientation represents a more thoroughgoing pastoralisation: it prioritises relationships, psychological reframing, and individual circumstances. Yet both orientations represent a departure from the traditional imam role, and both reflect the broader pastoralisation dynamic. The difference between them is one of degree, not of kind.

7. The Pastoralised Imam vs. Alternative Imam Roles

The limited sample in this study makes it necessary to discuss whether the findings can have a larger validity and how they relate to other possible ways of being an imam in Norway and Europe. The eight imams were all recruited through MDN, an umbrella organisation that explicitly encourages dialogue-oriented engagement with majority-society institutions in Norway. It may therefore be that the sample over-represents imams who are already inclined toward pastoral involvement. To probe this limitation, I draw on the two expert interviews with administrative mosque leaders described in the methods section. These informants were heavily involved in recruiting participants to educational programmes for religious leaders and therefore had extensive networks across mosques. Both expressed frustration that some imams, in their view, remained disengaged from congregants’ everyday lives. One of them, Ghulam, put it this way:

When it comes to the imams. . . Many of them are very capable, I must emphasise that. But some of them are also a bit, you know, in their own bubble. Or not in their own private bubble, but they don't move much outside the mosque. They sit isolated in the mosque. They may be highly educated and highly competent in various fields. But they do not have much contact with Norwegian society.

(...)

And so, you know, they don't really understand the reality of young people in this society either. They cannot speak to their situation. Just sitting in the mosque all day, honestly, I don't think that takes you very far.

The other leader expressed a similar sentiment—complaining that some imams did not move much outside the mosque walls and therefore could not relate to the social reality in their congregation.

These accounts do not constitute direct evidence of distinct alternative counselling orientations. As noted, these informants do not observe counselling sessions. The very imams they describe as “sitting isolated in the mosque” may in fact be counselling families who come to them while sitting in the mosque. Furthermore, these informants are not neutral observers. They were both heavily invested in inter-faith dialogue and educational programmes for imams. It is therefore possible that they hold the imams in their mosques to a particularly high standard. They are, nevertheless, actors with a very encompassing network among imams and mosques in Norway. The interviews therefore provide an indication that the sample in the study may be skewed toward pastoral engagement. Rather than using their accounts to describe an alternative category of practice among imams, I treat their observations as pointing toward undefined alternative modes of fulfilling the role of the imam—a mode of being imam that is not captured in my study and that may not involve pastoral counselling.

We can thus simplify the findings in the study in the following way, see Figure 1:

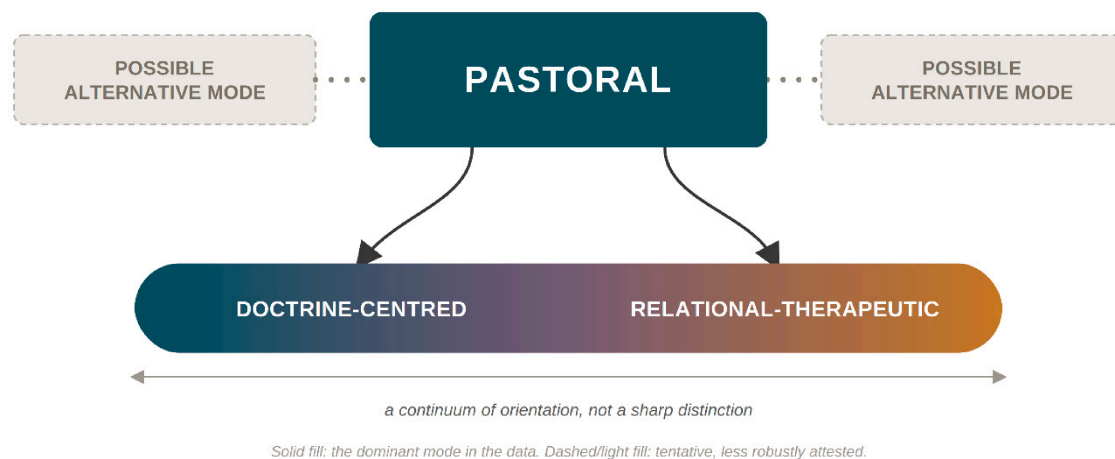


Figure 1. Varieties of imam engagement with youth and family counselling in Norway. Note: The doctrine-centred and relational-therapeutic orientations are empirically grounded in first-person interviews with eight imams. The boxes on the left and right do not point to observed practices but to hypothesised and undefined alternative imam roles, indicated by key interviews with two administrative mosque leaders. The figure is a heuristic simplification. Source: Figure generated by LLM (Claude Sonnet 4.6) from author’s instructions.

The concept of pastoralisation describes a tendency visible among the imams interviewed in the study, and is not a universal claim about all imams in Norway or Europe. But given that many mosques both in Norway and Europe do operate under conditions leading to churchification, it is not unreasonable to expect that pastoralisation of the role of the imam can be seen in other contexts as well.

8. Conclusions

The findings in this article contribute to two bodies of literature. First, it extends the scholarship on imam roles in Europe by providing empirical evidence about the content of pastoral practice among imams—specifically, how imams engage in youth and family counselling. Previous research has documented the expansion of the imam’s role and the structural pressures within mosques that have been characterised as churchification and congregationalisation. This scholarship, however, has said relatively little about

the implications that this structural transformation may have for the actual practice of counselling among imams. The concept of pastoralisation captures an important part of this process: imams are moving towards a way of fulfilling their role that prioritises relationships and counselling, on issues that have to do with human well-being in a broad sense.

Second, the findings in the article contribute to the emerging literature on Islamic counselling and chaplaincy by providing an examination of how orientations towards counselling manifest among imams in mosques, not just among chaplains in public institutions. The kerygmatic/therapeutic distinction and directive/non-directive distinction both find support in the data, though with important qualifications. The respondents could draw on both repertoires: even the most doctrinally oriented showed awareness of the relational dimensions of counselling, and even the most therapeutically oriented never abandoned their religious identity as the source of their authority.

The shared commitment to non-coercive guidance deserves particular attention. Public discourse about Muslim communities in Europe has paid considerable attention to questions of social control and religious pressure within families. The imams in the sample positioned themselves against coercive parenting and in favour of persuasion and alliance. Whether this reflects a genuine normative consensus within these communities, a response to the Norwegian social and political context, or a degree of social desirability in the interviews, cannot be determined from the present data. It is nonetheless a finding that complicates simple associations between conservative theology and authoritarian family practices.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study draws on a small, non-representative sample of eight imams from six MDN-affiliated congregations, as well as two administrative mosque leaders. While the sample captures variation in ethno-national background and theological orientation, the findings must be regarded as exploratory. Second, the data do not contain the perspectives of youth and parents themselves. Future research incorporating user perspectives would provide a more complete picture of how imam counselling is received and evaluated. Finally, the study is limited to a single national context. The Norwegian context is distinctive in several relevant respects. Mosques receive substantial funding from the state, and Muslim religious leaders often take part in interfaith dialogue activities, which may impact their approach. Whether pastoralisation is a tendency that can be seen in contexts with different church–state configurations and without a similar tradition of dialogue in the interfaith realm is an important question for future research.

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