

Article

Prison Chaplaincy as A Microaggressive Environment for the Non-Religious

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Abstract: This article unites the Special Issue’s themes of religion, prison, and spaces to examine the prison chaplaincy as a microaggressive environment for people of minority and especially non-religious belief. Although the chaplaincy purports to cater to all faiths and none, it is an inherently religious institution dominated by the Church of England, whose power and privilege is reinforced in both prison policy and legislation. After setting out the context and methodology of my empirical study, I unpack the concept of microaggressions and share original data from interviews with non-religious chaplaincy volunteers to demonstrate the ways in which prison chaplaincy can be alienating to people with a secular world view both as a pastoral service and a workplace. I also explore the physical space of the chaplaincy as a site of everyday othering, through its layout, language, and imagery. Ultimately, I argue that this facility is not suitable for everyone and creates hierarchies of access in which some prisoners and, indeed, staff feel more welcome than others. The article therefore proposes changes to people, place, and policy that could reduce this microaggressive impact.

Keywords: prison; chaplaincy; microaggressions; non-religious belief; pastoral care

1. Introduction

A multi-faith chaplaincy is established in every prison in England and Wales. This is a free, in-house facility dedicated to religious guidance and pastoral support for offenders and prison staff. The chaplaincy is run by a team of full-time employees, paid sessional staff, and volunteers from a range of belief groups, including the Church of England, Catholicism, Islam, Buddhism, and other religions, according to “the faith/denominational requirements of the prison” (Ministry of Justice 2016, p. 7).

The prevailing model of prison chaplaincy in England and Wales is Christian, and specifically Anglican. In the Victorian era, Church of England priests played an influential role in attempts to reform the criminal justice system, and Justices of the Peace began to appoint chaplains to serve their local prison. A chaplain is a religious leader who provides spiritual care in secular contexts (Sullivan 2014). It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that the law provided for prisoners who were not members of the Church of England. This Protestant privilege was reinforced by the Prison Act 1865, which stipulated that each prison “must appoint a chaplain, being a clergyman of the established church”. The same stipulation appears today at s.7 Prison Act 1952.

Chaplains have always held considerable influence in English prisons. The Church of England has benefited from powers and privileges that no other religious organisation has enjoyed in the country’s history since the late sixteenth century (Beckford and Gilliat 1998). Increasing religious diversity has been an important catalyst for change; at first, pastoral care was exclusively provided by Anglicans but, as society has become more plural and less religious, so too have chaplaincy services, beginning to incorporate providers of other faiths and, eventually, the non-religious. This has resulted in rapid and significant changes to the composition and function of pastoral care services.

Today, imams, rabbis, and ministers of other faiths have an active presence in many institutions, although they are always appointed in addition to—and never instead of—the



Citation: Hunt, Katie. 2024. Prison Chaplaincy as A Microaggressive Environment for the Non-Religious. *Religions* 15: 597. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15050597>

Academic Editor: Enzo Pace

Received: 19 February 2024

Revised: 20 March 2024

Accepted: 10 May 2024

Published: 13 May 2024



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Anglican chaplain. These representatives of other world views sometimes include members of the Non-Religious Pastoral Support Network (NRPSN), a community of trained and accredited pastoral carers who offer free secular support in chaplaincies across the country and volunteer in approximately one fifth of English prisons. The result is a modern and diverse chaplaincy that is open to all service users, regardless of belief.

The contemporary British prison estate is occupied by a great many people who do not regularly attend religious services (Todd and Lee 2011). Offender statistics from 31 December 2023 show that less than half of all prisoners are Christian, and less than one in seven are Anglican (Ministry of Justice 2024). Far from representing a majority of the inmate population, Anglicanism is not even the dominant Christian denomination; a higher number of prisoners are Roman Catholic. After Christians, the next largest category is the non-religious, who make up almost 31% of the prison population (although this is disputed—see below), a larger share than all non-Christian religious groups combined. Although the prison population is not representative of the general population, with some groups being dramatically over- or under-represented, this decline in religiosity mirrors the steady secularisation of UK society as a whole, occurring through sequential waves of immigration and a wide scale rejection of formal religious observance (Crompton and Hewson 2016). Less than one fifth of the British public say they are members of the Church of England, and less than 2% attend its services on any given week (Copson 2017). Over the past few decades, there has been substantial growth in the proportion of people describing themselves as non-religious. NatCen’s British Social Attitudes survey found that 53% of Britons “do not regard themselves as belonging to any religion” (NatCen 2019, p. 4), and the overwhelming majority of young Britons identify as non-religious, with 70% of 16–29-year-olds reporting no religious affiliation (Bullivant 2018). Moreover, for every one person brought up with no religion who has become a Christian, 26 people brought up as Christians now identify as non-religious (Bullivant 2017). Woodhead (2016) calls these people the cultural majority.

2. Methods

How realistic is the aim, set out in Ministry of Justice guidelines, for prison chaplaincies to be equally supportive “to prisoners of all faiths and none” (Ministry of Justice 2016, p. 22)? This article shares data from my doctoral research conducted at, and funded by, Southampton Law School, University of Southampton, UK.

I conducted a three-year study to determine the extent to which these facilities are inclusive of and accessible to the non-religious. This project employed established qualitative research methods to explore prison pastoral care provision. I visited prisons, observed the everyday operation of the prison chaplaincy, spoke with service users, and interviewed a small but diverse group of prison pastoral support providers and other criminal justice professionals. The comments of these participants appear as quotes throughout the text. My primary data collection entailed two focus groups and 13 individual interviews. The 21 participants—some of whom participated in both a focus groups and an interview—comprised eight chaplains, seven NRPSN members, three criminal justice professionals, and three charity volunteers. Between them, they had experience of 10 different prisons in England. One limitation of this study is that it focuses on prison chaplaincies in England; no comparison is made with prisons in other countries.

Participants were invited to contribute through whichever method was most convenient for them. I conducted semi-structured interviews in person, on the telephone, by Skype, and through email. All interviews were audio recorded, with the participants’ consent, then transcribed and anonymised. Participants are numbered in the chronological order of their contributions and identified by job role. Two participants waived their anonymity and chose to be named (see endnotes). I coded and thematically analysed my transcripts using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software QSR NVivo 11. Two of my chaplain interviewees invited me to their prisons on field visits. By chance, both were sex offender institutions. As a result, all my first-hand observations of chaplaincy life and interactions with prisoners came from English prisons holding adult male sex

offenders. I used a journal to record impressions while visiting prisons, experiences during the research process, and incidental conversations.

This project received ethical approval from His Majesty's Prisons and Probation Service (HMPPS) National Research Committee and the University of Southampton Research Ethics Committee. To ensure that my work was ethically and methodologically sound, I ensured informed consent and participant confidentiality and had my interview prompts and questions approved in advance by both committees.

Following this study, my findings on religious inequalities in prison pastoral care have been published elsewhere (Hunt 2022). My findings on the prison chaplaincy as a microaggressive space for people of non-religious belief are set out below. The structure of the article is as follows. Having provided the context and methodology of the research in Sections 1 and 2, I turn in Section 3 to the concept of microaggressions and explain how this phenomenon—originally coined as a way of recognising instances of everyday racism—applies in the prison chaplaincy, which may be experienced as an exclusive environment, both as a facility for non-religious prisoners and a workplace for non-religious staff. In Section 4, I move from the people and politics of the chaplaincy to the chaplaincy as a physical space, the design and even décor of which sends signals about who is an insider and who is an outsider. In Section 5, I propose recommendations for reform to make the prison chaplaincy a more inclusive place for its service users and services providers alike, before making my conclusions in Section 6.

3. Microaggressions

Although the service is open to everybody, and teams are increasingly willing to include a secular representative, the fact remains that prison chaplaincy is an inherently religious institution dominated by the Church of England, whose power and privilege is reinforced in both prison policy and legislation. There is no pretence that chaplaincy is neutral towards all religions (Beckford and Gilliat 1998), and the former Chaplain-General of Prisons, Michael Kavanagh, has himself recognised “that a single ‘one size fits all’ model is not going to work” (Kavanagh 2015, p. 257).

Pierce coined the term ‘microaggressions’ (Pierce 1974) to describe the everyday slights and indignities that cumulatively create an atmosphere of hostility towards a particular group. The word was originally used in the context of racism in America but applies here to what Beckford and Gilliat, in their study of religious inequality in prison, call “the many irritations which were insignificant in themselves, but which added up to a serious and long-running injustice” (Beckford and Gilliat 1998, p. 84). For example, when a non-religious prisoner was unable to attend the funeral of the grandmother who had raised him, Participant 9 tried to help him mark her passing from prison:

I took him to the multi-faith room and gave him some poems to choose from. He asked me to read one and he read one as well, and we played her favourite song and talked about his memories of her, instead of having a pray. We had one of those plastic electric candles to switch on because we're not allowed candles. You're only allowed candles in the prison if it's for holy reasons. —Participant 9, NRPSN member

Between Christian prisoners and chaplains, it is common practice to mourn the dead for funerals and anniversaries by lighting a candle, but because the occasion was not “holy”, a grieving man had to commemorate the life of a loved one with a battery-operated tea light, cheapening what could have been a poignant moment, and no doubt would have been had he only been religious.

This is just one example among many, and these experiences are not limited to non-religious service users. During my research interviews, members of the Non-Religious Pastoral Support Network shared the myriad ways, great and small, in which they felt othered and excluded in their volunteer work.

Sue et al. (2007) extend the concept of microaggressions by identifying three degrees of microaggression: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Again, the authors

developed these categories as a way of thinking about racial discrimination, but they are instructive to us in the present context too. Microassaults are deliberate oppressive actions, such as name-calling, avoidance, or unfair treatment, where the aggressor is usually protected (commonly by anonymity or safety among likeminded others). Microinsults are inadvertent snubs and verbal slights that can arise even when the perpetrator is trying to be inclusive. They often take the form of insensitive questions or backhanded compliments, such as telling a trans person that they ‘pass’ well or praising a person of colour for being articulate or speaking English well. Microinvalidations deny the thoughts and feelings of others by imposing a reality or creating an environment that does not reflect everyone’s experiences. Below, I expand on these categories and demonstrate how they arise in the chaplaincy environment.

3.1. Microassaults

A microassault is an overt instance of unequal treatment that deliberately excludes the marginalised group. It is an ‘assault’ in the sense that, though it may stop short of criminal behaviour, it is wilfully hurtful and experienced as a kind of violence. My interviews uncovered microassaults towards prisoners and pastoral carers alike. One chaplain, though she insisted that prisoners of all beliefs were treated fairly, displayed an intolerant attitude towards the adjustments that are necessary for a spiritually diverse community to enjoy equal opportunities for worship.

The pagan prisoners are allowed to have in their possession artefacts which include some sort of altar—very few of them have got that—a wand and a rope. [...] It’s the worst part of the job for me, because as soon as I’m dealing with somebody saying, “I need to buy a wand”, I get very irritated because I think, “Would you be buying a wand in the community?” [...] I’m sure there are plenty of sticks in the prison grounds. —Participant 15, prison chaplain

In general, religious chaplaincy teams conduct excellent work in providing high-quality care to members of their respective faiths. While many non-religious pastoral carers found their colleagues to be “welcoming” (Participant 3, NRPSN member), “supportive” (Participant 9, NRPSN member), and “totally accepting” (Participant 14, NRPSN member), they noted that “that’s with the active support of the Head Chaplain. Without that, you’re a bit stuck” (Participant 4, NRPSN member). The reliance on religious team leaders reproduces relations of dependence, and Beckford describes how “this dependency gives rise to feelings of resentment, unjust discrimination, and marginalization” (Beckford 1999, p. 315). Interviewees reported being left out of the loop, omitted from email chains, and excluded from events, which made them feel like “an add-on and not really part of the organisation” (Participant 16, NRPSN member). One chaplain frequently removed the posters displayed by the non-religious pastoral carer in her team (“If I put up a list of the dates that I would be coming in and put the word ‘non-religious’ on the poster so that they knew what it was, that would be taken down”—Participant 16, NRPSN member) and spoke frankly about the restrictions she placed on her colleague:

She [Participant 16, NRPSN member] was a bit frustrated with me because I wouldn’t publicise her meetings, and that was because she held them in the core working day and we could have had any number of people. We wouldn’t let Nils¹ go to her meeting, they had to register as Atheist or Agnostic. It had to be a statement of religious persuasion rather than just ‘I don’t have any affiliation to anything, and I don’t know what I believe, and I’m going to call myself Nothing’. —Participant 15, prison chaplain

Some NRPSN members described a culture of hostility and intimidation, with “them on one side and us on the other” (Participant 4). If chaplaincy staff did not accept non-religious pastoral carers or refused to recognise them as part of the team, the latter were left in a liminal position:

As far as the prisoners are concerned, we're part of chaplaincy— 'ugh!'—that sort of immediately identifies us as something, but as far as chaplaincy's concerned, we're not quite part of them because we're non-religious. I just think that's a very uneasy place to be in. —Participant 4, NRPSN member

Many attributed this ostracism to the perceived threat that a non-religious pastoral carer might pose ("They feel threatened about their jobs, that we're trying to make everything non-religious"—Participant 3, NRPSN member). Having always been an established figure with a legislative mandate, what does it mean for the future of prison chaplains if one does not need to be a minister, or even religious, to do the job?

"The Head Chaplain at the time saw it as a threat. He put every obstacle in my way to try and stop it from happening, and was quite abusive, really, and I ended up having to put a complaint of bullying in against him. So, yeah, it was very difficult". —Participant 9, NRPSN member

Even when non-religious team members have good working relationships and are included by their religious colleagues in multicultural events, the latter usually play the leading roles. In this way, even joint ventures can inadvertently perpetuate the exclusion of secular world views.

We had a kind of religious fair that they ran every year, all the religions. The idea was that prisoners could find out what went on in the chaplaincy, and so all the religions laid out their wares on a stall and people came around, and the last time that I was involved in that, they put us in a separate little room. So, it made it less accessible. —Participant 16, NRPSN member

3.2. *Microinsults*

More common than these microassaults were microinsults, such as accidental oversights or rude remarks by religious chaplains, that, however well-intentioned, had the effect of undermining a person or group ("People could be welcoming and still not know how to help and facilitate you" (Participant 3, NRPSN member)). Some chaplains had positive working relationships with their non-religious colleagues and recognised "that a person of no faith can be just as compassionate and perhaps, on some days, more compassionate than I am" (Participant 11, prison chaplain), while others had the "notion that faith is kind of necessary for pastoral care" (Participant 12, prison chaplain). Even where colleagues were supportive, they often unwittingly made insensitive comments or misjudged jokes ("One of them came over and said, "Oh, Christ hasn't found you yet"". —Participant 7, NRPSN member) that demonstrated a lack of understanding.

She was a Salvation Army lady. I said about the difference in dealing with bereavement, specifically, and she said to me, "Oh, it must be so difficult, because you don't have any hope." [...] Her heart was really in the right place, but it demonstrated to me that she just didn't get it. [...] Even with the people that are quite nice to you, you still get some of those questions. "Oh, how can you have morals if you don't believe in a God?" "How can you comfort somebody at the end of their life, or if they're bereaved, if you can't offer them any hope?" —Participant 9, NRPSN member

For some, the discrimination they encountered as a secular member of a religious chaplaincy team intersected with discrimination based on their other characteristics, compounding the feeling of marginalisation.

[The rabbi] wouldn't look me in the eye or shake my hand, not because I was a humanist but because I was a woman. [...] And the Roman Catholic, he found it hard to shake my hand, just found it, I don't know, almost sort of heretical. [...] They really didn't want to have anything to do with me. [...] It's hard to maintain your sense of worth, I suppose, if all around you people are being offensive or

ignoring you or not showing any interest in what you're doing. —Participant 16, NRPSN member

The effect of all these slights and exclusions is cumulative. Non-religious pastoral carers described how the environment chips away at one's wellbeing ("There are times when you just want to sort of go and weep in a corner"—Participant 3, NRPSN member) and self-esteem. All NRPSN members spoke about feeling unwelcome and unsupported, at least at first, and constantly second-guessing themselves:

Have I just got this completely wrong? Have I just made a really bad move here, said the wrong thing, said it in a bad way, done the opposite of what I'm hoping to do, which is to make myself useful and be generally liked and respected? [...] It is complex and, at the moment, I'm feeling a bit unequal to it. —Participant 4, NRPSN member

Writing in the late 1990s, Beckford and Gilliat observed that "what the chaplains regard as their even-handedness and tolerance is interpreted by some of their critics as exclusion and discrimination" (Beckford and Gilliat 1998, p. 56). The similarity between the challenges faced by Visiting Ministers and minority faith representatives 25 years ago and the experiences of non-religious pastoral carers today is striking. In both cases, the visitors lament their dependence on a powerful Anglican chaplaincy, poor access to prisoners, difficult internal politics, unequal standing and terms compared to Christian colleagues, and the impression that they are there "to tick the equality box" (Participant 5, then Head of Pastoral Support at Humanists UK²) but viewed as unnecessary or even a nuisance. That these inequalities have persisted for so long indicates that the delivery of prison chaplaincy remains unsatisfactory.

3.3. Microinvalidations

A minority group experiences microinvalidations when something is established as, or depicted as, the norm while excluding or negating the experiences of that group. According to the Prison Service's most recent statistics, 31% of prisoners record no religion on admission (Ministry of Justice 2024), but there was a great diversity of opinion among interviewees as to how 'Nil—No Religion' should be interpreted. Does it mean that the prisoner has no religion, or merely that they have not chosen to record a religion? If the former, should this be construed positively as denoting a person with non-religious beliefs or negatively as denoting a person without religious beliefs?

I would question whether a third of the population are non-religious. I accept that a third might say they're 'nil'. 'Nil' is simply 'I'm not declaring what my faith or belief system is'; it doesn't mean that you're non-religious. —Participant 10, then Chaplain-General of Prisons³

For many people, ticking the 'No Religion' box is a declaration that being non-religious is part of their identity (Savage 2019). For example, when Voas and Ling (2010) studied religiosity in Britain, 26% of their survey respondents described themselves as 'very or extremely non-religious' compared with only 7% describing themselves as 'very or extremely religious'. Not only does the refusal to interpret a registration as 'Nil—No Religion' as a statement of non-religious belief invalidate secular world views, but the marginalisation is also compounded by the practice of referring to such people as 'nils' or "floating voters" (Participant 12, prison chaplain). This was perceived as disrespectful and dehumanising.

We're zero. [...] Their intention is to provide for all faiths and none, but already you're in a negative because you're a 'none' and in prison you actually get called a 'nil' [...] So, they do talk about 'the nils' without even realising that that might be quite insulting. —Participant 3, NRPSN member

The position of most of my chaplain interviewees was that "not all the non-religious people are irreligious" (Participant 12, prison chaplain) and that it would therefore be inappropriate for an NRPSN member to approach them or to assume that their care needs

are not met by religious chaplaincy staff. In turn, NRPSN members said they felt that they, and their world views, were demeaned by chaplains, some of whom found it difficult to recognise non-religious beliefs as moral positions in their own right. NRPSN members reflected that “for some people, it is a struggle, and that in itself felt like one area of contention to get through even before you get access to people, to have some validity” (Participant 3, NRPSN member).

This came up repeatedly in my fieldwork, when religious chaplains told me that there was no need for secular pastoral care because the chaplaincy serves everybody. Assuming that the needs of non-religious people can be met by religious chaplains invalidates non-religious beliefs. It has the dual effect of treating non-faith chaplains unequally by refusing to include or appoint them, and treating non-faith prisoners unequally by denying them belief-appropriate care.

I don’t think there was a need for [a non-religious pastoral carer. . .] because I think we do it well. I don’t think you’d find anyone saying that that wasn’t done well by chaplains. —Participant 15, prison chaplain

There was a recurring tension here between my religious and non-religious interviewees, as chaplains resented the suggestion that they could effectively support secular service users (“some people find it very undermining, as though ‘you’re attacking me and what I’ve always managed to do’”—Participant 3, NRPSN member), while, for NRPSN members, chaplains’ claim that they could “cover it all” was “an irritating statement, I think, to almost all humanists” (Participant 7, NRPSN member).

Chaplains felt as though some of the non-religious groups were sort of saying, ‘Well, you know, all these ‘nils’, they’re all non-religious, therefore you’re not providing for them.’ And I think, if you’re a chaplain, that really. . . because you know that’s not true. —Participant 10, then Chaplain-General of Prisons

I have demonstrated elsewhere (Hunt 2022) that, whether the non-religious are welcomed or not, chaplaincy services are typically perceived as being incompatible with the beliefs of people of no faith, because it is an inherently religious service.

It’s a place they know they can go, but some people will not go. And, if they’re anti-religious, they don’t want to have anything to do with the chaplaincy. —Participant 16, NRPSN member

Perhaps the best demonstration of the chaplaincy as an alienating or microinvalidating environment is the design and decoration of the setting itself.

4. The Physical Space

It is not just chaplaincy as an institution that can be less accessible, but also the physical space. In most establishments, the ‘multi-faith’ chaplaincy revolves around a Christian chapel inside the prison. I recall how, during fieldwork visits, passing through the chaplaincy doors felt like entering a church. I found myself in what Savage calls “an inequitable space [. . .] full of Christian symbolism” (Savage 2019, p. 98) and immediately had the sense of being out of place. To appreciate this outsider perspective, I ask Christian readers to imagine that they are incarcerated in a prison where the chaplaincy is open to all but led by an imam from a mosque (people and places unsuited to your world view, as vicars and chapels are to the non-religious). How comfortable would you feel engaging with those services? If the answer is ‘less comfortable than a Muslim would feel’, you have a sense of the hierarchies of access and opportunity that these institutions create.

In many prisons, those of minority faiths are also expected to worship in the clearly unsuitable Christian chapel.

They pull curtains around to cover all the iconography in the chapel, and that is where the Muslims meet as well. It looks very camp because there are a lot of velvet drapes everywhere! —Participant 3, NRPSN member

The image of Christianity as ‘the man behind the curtain’ seems a fitting metaphor for prison chaplaincy as a whole, an ostensibly equitable facility managed and controlled by a powerful Anglican presence.

Where an alternative room is provided, it is typically a ‘multi-faith space’ that is far less grand and less visible, for the use of prisoners of all other world views except Christianity. The multi-faith space I visited was beige, anonymous, and looked more like a disused staff room than a place to celebrate holy days and commune with God.

We’ve also got a multi-faith room at the back there which is not the best. It would be nicer if it was a bit bigger and kind of a bit better designed, but that’s used for Friday prayers and the Rastafarian group, the pagan group, the Buddhist group. . . —Participant 13, prison chaplain

Crompton and Hewson describe multi-faith spaces as being “like hotel rooms, approximate dwellings yet home to nobody” (Crompton and Hewson 2016, p. 81). Although this is true to the extent that no user is in his preferred place of worship, the comparison is not entirely accurate. In a hotel, guests are all visitors on an equal footing, whereas in a multi-faith chaplaincy, some guests are more ‘at home’ than others. Religiosity—the shared fact of belief, if not the values themselves—unites all users except the non-religious.

At the first prison I visited, the chapel had been rebranded the Faith Centre in hopes that the move from the Christian word ‘chapel’ to the multi-denominational word ‘faith’ would be more inclusive to people of other religions. The team appeared not to have considered that ‘Faith Centre’ is equally alienating to people of no faith, whom the institution also seeks to support. This supposedly multi-denominational space featured an enormous crucifix, Christian artwork and other imagery, and a church-like layout with rows of seating equipped with kneelers and a table at the front.

My Lead Chaplain always said, “But it’s open to everyone, it’s not Christian” and you think, “Well, actually, all the imagery is Christian”. —Participant 3, NRPSN member

The design of multi-faith spaces is a seemingly uncontroversial aspect that neatly demonstrates how “subtle processes of resistance and power relations are at work, and there are almost inevitably ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ in the process” (Gilliat-Ray 2005, p. 303). Suppose that we are tasked with creating a space to be used by different religious communities. We might imagine a quiet room with a table at the front on which to place iconography, and rows of seating for worshippers. This may sound neutral enough, but already the designer’s assumptions about how a sacred space looks have crept in, creating a distinctly Christian environment. The rows of seating evoke pews; the table, an altar. A different person might have suggested a shoe rack at the entrance and a carpet on the floor, thereby creating an environment more familiar to Muslims.

The microaggressive environment extends beyond the design and layout of the space to the language used in signage and leaflets, and even the name of the service. Specifically, a ‘non-religious chaplain’ may seem a contradiction in terms (Lawton et al. 2023).

Could there be an alternative word, or could we change it? Well, what is a chaplain? You know, is it even a helpful term? [. . .] Are these things off-putting? —Participant 11, prison chaplain

Language can be a powerful tool of inclusion and exclusion. In prison, many of the words that are used in an everyday way to apply to universal services have distinctly religious meanings, such as, ‘chapel’, ‘chaplaincy’, and ‘spiritual’. These words imply that the facilities in question are run by and for people of faith. Most non-religious pastoral carers identified terminology as a hurdle.

Even the language is against you! —Participant 4, NRPSN member

Poor religious literacy and misconceptions around religion and non-religion foster misconceptions about who a chaplain is and what chaplaincy can be.

I would just assume that chaplains had a faith of some sort. —Participant 12, prison chaplain

Participant 12 is in the majority here. A survey of 4000 Britons revealed that chaplains are overwhelmingly seen as Christian ([Humanists UK 2016](#)); as many as 83% of respondents thought a chaplain could be Christian, 7% thought a chaplain could be from another religion, and only 5% of respondents thought that a chaplain could be a non-religious person. Lawton, Anderson, and Cadge ([Lawton et al. 2023](#)) explain that “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. Non-religious chaplains are affected by this expectation”. Multi-faith prison chaplaincy cannot be neutral and inclusive when the word ‘chaplaincy’ is not neutral and inclusive ([Savage 2019](#)).

The branding of pastoral care conveys its role and meaning through language, symbols, spaces, and visual cues, including uniforms, literature, and behaviours, all of which can be encouraging or familiar to some and discouraging or alienating to others. Consider the information that is provided to prisoners on arrival. I agree with Savage that “if the front cover of a leaflet consists of religious symbols and/or the word ‘chaplaincy’, it can be seen as a leaflet for religious people and only religious people [. . .] Hence, some non-religious people who may have benefited from attending may have been inadvertently discouraged” ([Savage 2019](#), p. 127).

If you were given this with no added information, would you think, as a non-religious person, that it was for you? Would you even read any further once you’ve glanced at the front page? —Participant 4, NRPSN member

5. Recommendations

I catalogue these microaggressions not to smear prison chaplains, but to illustrate the routine othering and exclusion of both service users and staff of minority or non-religious belief. I submit that transforming the prison chaplaincy from a microaggressive to an inclusive environment requires changes to policy, people, and practice.

The first step is to recognise non-religious world views as moral positions in their own right, and non-religious people as people with beliefs (that happen to be secular). Included in this is the important acknowledgement that a prisoner who identifies themselves as ‘Nil—No Religion’ is making a statement of non-religious belief and should be regarded as non-religious rather than being required to register as Atheist or Humanist in order to attend non-religious events. Prisoners who register in this way on arrival should be informed of the availability of secular support.

I’d managed to get to shadow one of the C of E people doing Receptions. [. . .] She was going to all the cells, ticking everyone off her list, giving them the chaplaincy leaflet, which talks a lot about religion and a little tiny bit about pastoral care, and is emblazoned on the front with all the symbols of the different religions. She said all the different chaplains that there are, and even though I was standing right behind her, she did not mention that there was a non-religious chaplain. —Participant 4, NRPSN member

Once we accept that a third of the prison population have identified themselves as non-religious, the question is how best to support them. Non-religious people have pastoral care needs that, I argue, are not well served by a solely religious chaplaincy. Prison policy requires that “the chaplaincy provision reflects the faith/denominational requirements of the prison” ([Ministry of Justice 2016](#), p. 7). Switching the word ‘faith’ to ‘belief’ here would ensure that chaplaincy teams reflect the entire population of the prison, not just the religious population. This would necessitate the appointment of at least one non-religious pastoral carer to every prison chaplaincy team. This person should be a paid, employed staff member, not a volunteer on unequal footing with their religious colleagues.

I certainly see the disparity between the fact that I have a full-time paid job and [Participant 14] is a volunteer. [...] How much time do you have if you're a volunteer? —Participant 12, prison chaplain

Already these two changes are likely to make a dramatic difference to the status of, and respect accorded to, secular service users and care providers. But, even if prisoners and pastoral carers of no faith enjoy equal treatment and opportunity in the chaplaincy, the environment itself may still signal that the service is not for them. The third change is therefore to renovate the chaplaincy space itself, paying particular attention to imagery, language, and layout.

I think we will gradually find language that works across faith and belief as a whole. I don't think we're there yet, but I think we're heading in that direction. —Participant 10, then Chaplain-General of Prisons

Specifically, prisons should avoid approximating a Christian church when only a small proportion of the population is Christian. Leaflets, signs, and other communications should avoid using exclusively religious or Christian language; terms like 'chaplaincy', 'multi-faith space' and 'prayer room' could be replaced by a secular name like 'pastoral care centre' or 'reflection room'. Although religious staff would still need to be ministers of the faiths they represent, civilian clothing and job titles (such as '_____ pastoral carer' or simply '_____ representative') may help to break down barriers. In many cases, communications will need to change significantly to demonstrate that what was once a traditionally religious service has transformed into a service for everyone. The updated terminology has been implemented successfully in other settings:

In hospitals, they're starting to move towards different language, and talking about Pastoral Support and Chaplaincy departments [...] so it's not just all about religion. You can tell from the name of the department that it's inclusive for everybody. —Participant 9, NRPSN member

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, I have demonstrated that, despite—or perhaps because of—its multi-faith ethos, the modern prison chaplaincy is sometimes alienating to non-religious prisoners and the staff who support them. These microaggressions arise through a combination of outright unfavourable treatment, inadvertent slights and insensitive comments, and a physical environment that clearly signals to those of minority and non-religious beliefs that they are outsiders. To combat this, I propose a recognition of secular world views as beliefs in themselves; equal opportunities to receive and to provide non-religious care, achieved by employing non-religious pastoral carers in every chaplaincy; and a redesign of chaplaincy spaces to ensure that they are inclusive to all faiths and none, and not merely approximations of Christian churches. Woodhead (2016) points out that the 'nones' are not at loggerheads with the 'somes'; indeed, there is scope for these groups to work together to establish more inclusive services, careers, and a common approach to spiritual care that values and draws on all faiths and beliefs.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: This project received ethical approval from His Majesty's Prisons and Probation Service (HMPPS) National Research Committee and the University of Southampton Research Ethics Committee.

Informed Consent Statement: Written informed consent to publication was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The original data contributions presented in the study have been destroyed, in accordance with University of Southampton Research Ethics Committee requirements, because the period for which participants consented to raw data storage had ended.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Prisoners who register as ‘Nil—No Religion’ are not considered by chaplains to have identified themselves as non-religious, and are often insultingly described as ‘Nils’. This is explored below.
- ² This interviewee is identifiable. I am grateful to Simon O’Donoghue, then Head of Pastoral Support at Humanists UK, who was happy to be interviewed ‘on the record’.
- ³ This interviewee is identifiable. I am grateful to Rev Mike Kavanagh, then Chaplain-General of Prisons, who was happy to be interviewed ‘on the record’.

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