Chaplaincy in a Pluralist World

Dr Neil Percival

As Christian chaplains, we minister in a world where, in recent decades, "public norms have been [increasingly] secularised (Swift, Cobb, & Todd, 2016, p. 64). It is a world where "generic spirituality" is a less divisive and more "politically convenient construct for a society in which religion has ceased to be an implicit part of day-to-day life" (Swift, 2009, p. 141).

> Policy and practice are now located within a discourse of human rights and diversity of culture and morality. This has established pluralism as a norm and diversity as a good that contributes to the well-being of society (Swift, Cobb, & Todd, 2016, p. 64).

The term, "pluralism", can be used in several ways.

1. Cultural pluralism

In the late 1980's, Newbigin used the terms "plurality" and "cultural pluralism" to describe a society in which "people of many different ethnic origins and of many different religious commitments" coexist in public life and contribute to the "enrichment of human life" (Newbigin, 1989, p. 14). Stott wrote that "pluralism is an affirmation of the validity of every religion, and the refusal to choose between them" (cited in Milton, 2006, p. 7). Milton used the term "pluralistic" to describe "the undeniable plurality of beliefs and ideas and even the customs and cultures that are derived from these ideas" (Milton, 2006, p. 6). More recently, Jumper et al have used the term "pluralistic" to refer to "a society or other community that has an undeniable plurality of beliefs and ideas and even the customs and cultures that are derived from those ideas" (Jumper, Keith, & Langston, 2024, p. 53). This is the cultural norm of contemporary society.

The associated values are that "cultural pluralism" is regarded as something to be embraced "approved and cherished" (Newbigin, 1989, p. 1) and difference is met with "love and respect" (Jumper, Keith, & Langston, 2024, p. 54).

2. Religious pluralism

A second use of the word "pluralism", also referred to as "religious pluralism," is to describe an ideology (Milton, 2006, p. 6). "Religious pluralism" is "a matter of ideology" and involves an affirmation of the "validity of every religion, and the refusal to choose between them" (Jumper, Keith, & Langston, 2024, p. 53). This ideology holds that the differences between religions are "different perceptions of the one truth," that no one religion can claim to possess absolute truth, and that, while everyone is entitled to their own personal and private beliefs, to make public claims that "religious beliefs [are] true or false is inadmissible" (Newbigin, 1989, p. 14) because there are no objective facts against which to test them (Newbigin, 1989, p. 16).

Indeed, to promote a single faith tradition is to "denigrate the particular beliefs of most other faiths" (Jumper, Keith, & Langston, 2024, p. 54). Moreover, promoting one faith tradition is perceived negatively as a rejection of "the means for building bridges and relationships that create harmony and peace" (Milton, 2006, p. 8).

3. The implications of pluralism for the chaplain's ministry context

The norm of the world in which we live and minister is "cultural pluralism," which is the driver of the ideology of "religious pluralism." We have no alternative but to accept the former, however, we cannot embrace the ideology that all religions are simply "different perceptions of the one truth" and that no one religion can claim to possess absolute truth (Newbigin, 1989, p. 14). Stott has argued that [religious] pluralism is, in effect, "the rejection of world evangelism" (cited in Milton, 2006, p. 7). As Christians, we are at odds with the world "for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12 ESV).

What are the implications of cultural and religious pluralism for our ministry context?

a. Multi-faith or generic chaplaincy

First, the "increasingly pluralistic and culturally diverse" nature of modern society demands that chaplaincy become "multi-faith in form" (Swift, 2009, p. xiii). This has led to the reorganization of chaplaincy services into "(a) multifaith teams, in which chaplains are recruited that represent specific religious identities and/or (b) generic chaplaincy, in which chaplains work and present themselves in a religiously neutral way even though they are still expected to work from a personal faith" (Visser, Vähäkangas, Baig, & Thomsen, 2025, p. 240). The evidence for multifaith teams is seen in the increasing numbers of Jewish and Muslim chaplains, in particular, joining what were once exclusively Christian chaplaincy teams.

> Most organizations seek faith-group diversity in their chaplaincy program in order to better serve the broad spectrum of religious needs represented throughout their workforce (Baker, 2021, p. 95).

Arguments for generic chaplaincy are predicated on the belief that there is a fundamental unity to all worldviews.

> While different worldviews offer different spiritual resources for meaning making in the face of disorientation, all worldviews comprise a profound belief – or faith – that not all good is lost forever, that some notion of the good remains believable against the odds (Schuhmann, Jacobs, & Damen, 2026, p. 48).

b. Suspicion about religion in the public domain

Second, religion is broadly regarded as having the capacity to make a positive contribution to societal and individual well-being, but, at the same time, there is "considerable suspicion about the public place of religion" (Swift, 2009, p. xiii) and a perceived negative connection with "irrational fundamentalisms and its potential for proselytising" (Swift, Cobb, & Todd, 2016, p. 64). At the moment, Christian chaplains remain in the majority and "dominate facilities, access and leverage" in what has been termed, a "subordinated inclusion," where the "inclusion of ethnic minorities takes place only on the premises of the majority" Visser et al., 2025, p. 240), but that is changing and Christian chaplains must learn how to work alongside chaplains from other faiths.

c. Complexity of approach

Third, in a pluralist world, chaplains can "no longer assume a uniform approach to religion and identity" but instead have to navigate the complexities of diverse "language, ritual, and other practices" amongst those with whom they seek to minister (Visser et al., 2025, p. 240).

> Chaplains have to relate to people with a variety of worldview orientations so that they cannot provide care from within a certain worldview which serves as a self-evident, shared normative framework (Schuhmann, Jacobs, & Damen, 2026, p. 46).

d. Professional pluralism

Fourth, "religious pluralism" has expanded into a broader "professional pluralism" where spiritual care is regarded as the responsibility of an inter-disciplinary team rather than being the sole preserve of a specialist chaplain. Each member of the team is directed by their own personal belief system or lack of a belief system (Visser et al., 2025, p. 241).

4. Five tasks for effective chaplaincy in a pluralist world

This is the brave new world in which chaplains operate. How should we adapt our approach in order to minister effectively?

One option is to reject the changes in society and continue on with business as usual. However, to do so is to condemn ourselves to increasing irrelevance and a commensurate loss of access to the very people we seek to serve as organisations can no longer justify investing in our presence.

a. Embracing cooperation without compromise

Alternatively, Milton argues that we embrace the principle of "cooperation without compromise." This approach has a set of values that includes "respect for others, support of others, no proselytising, follow the existing laws, no need to compromise one's own religious values and practices" (Milton, 2006, p. 10). It is possible to provide a high level of non-religious care without accepting the ideological premise of generic chaplaincy that there is a fundamental unity to all worldviews oriented around seeking the good. Similarly, "no proselytising" does not mean an end to active evangelism. It simply means that we present the gospel respectfully, waiting until "there is an invitation for us to speak" and doing so "without knocking over the altars of other religions" (Milton, 2006, p. 10).

This is quite consistent with Jesus' example in John 4, where he waited for the Samaritan woman to ask for the gift of "a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14 ESV). It is also consistent with the Apostle Paul's actions in Athens (Acts 17:16-33) where he "cooperated with the pluralist culture" (Milton, 2006, p. 13) without compromising his gospel agenda, even citing from the Athenian's own religious traditions (Acts 17:23) and poets (Acts 17:28), as he waited for an invitation to speak about Jesus in the Areopagus (Acts 17:19).

b. Developing interfaith competence

Because chaplaincy is frequently conducted in a context where resources and facilities are shared and access must be negotiated, chaplains must work cooperatively. As cooperation requires understanding, we should develop the core professional skill of interfaith

competence (Visser et al., 2025, p. 241). Teams must "'learn from, with and about' each other, creating opportunities for deep understanding across worldview boundaries that benefit patient care," "honouring diversity" through open and respectful dialogue around differing worldviews, identifying common ground, and seeking connections across differences (Visser et al., 2025, p. 242).

c. Fostering interprofessional collaboration

Third, chaplains must foster "interprofessional collaboration." The rise of "professional pluralism" (Visser et al., 2025, p. 241) means that every member of an inter-disciplinary team is deemed to be a provider of generalist spiritual care. Chaplains must prove themselves to be the experts in specialist spiritual care. As other team members observe, and come to understand, respect, and trust the competency of chaplains, improved collaboration and requests for support will follow. To this end, chaplains must be present, visible, and leave their mark. Documentation is an important contributor to the latter.

> Chaplains who document their work in shared medical records leave 'footprints' that demonstrate a more comprehensive view of their contribution and achieve better integration into healthcare teams (Visser et al., 2025, p. 242).

d. Accepting faith-neutral chaplaincy

Fourth, along with improved collaboration comes the need to accept the place of faith-neutral chaplaincy alongside specialised religious chaplaincy (Visser et al., 2025, p. 243). Being sensitive to the beliefs and values of their clients, chaplains provide spiritual (non-religious) care to all and pastoral (religious) care to those for whom it is appropriate and who request it.

e. Advocating for equality

Fifth, recognizing the problem of "subordinated inclusion," chaplains must be alert to "structural inequalities and power dynamics" and "advocate for more equitable systems" (Visser et al., 2025, p. 243). We must be seen to eschew exclusivism and to uphold the rights of all to choose the spiritual care that best aligns with their personal beliefs and values.

References

Baker, A. T. (2021). *Foundations of chaplaincy: A practical guide*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Jumper, M. A., Keith, S. E., & Langston, M. W. (2024). *Chaplaincy: a comprehensive introduction*. Baker Books.

Milton, M. A. (2006). *Cooperation Without Compromise: Faithful Gospel Witness in a Pluralistic Setting*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock.

Newbigin, L. (1989). *The gospel in a pluralist society*. London: SPCK.

Schuhmann, C., Jacobs, G., & Damen, A. (2026). Chaplaincy in secularizing, plural societies. In C. Schuhmann, A. Damen, G. Jacobs, M. Lieberwerth, & J. Wojtkowiak (Eds.), *Chaplaincy for a Plural World: Humanist perspectives* (pp. 43-60). New York, NY: Routledge.

Swift, C. (2009). *Hospital chaplaincy in the twenty-first century: The crisis of spiritual care on the NHS*. Routledge.

Swift, C., Cobb, M., & Todd, A. (Eds.). (2016). *A Handbook of Chaplaincy Studies*. Routledge.

Visser, A., Vähäkangas, A., Baig, N., & Thomsen, K. F. (2025). Chaplaincy in a pluralistic context. *J Health Care Chaplain*, *31*(4), 239-245.