



Spiritual Counseling and Care Services in Belgium

Belçika'da Manevi Danışmanlık ve Rehberlik Hizmetleri



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<https://doi.org/10.56432/tmdrd.1529014>

Türk Manevi Danışmanlık ve Rehberlik Dergisi Turkish Journal for the Spiritual Counseling and Care

Makale Bilgisi	Article Information
Makale Türü • Article Type	Araştırma Makalesi • Research Article
Geliş Tarihi • Received	06 Ağustos 2024 • 06 August 2024
Düzeltilme Tarihi • Revised	20 Eylül 2024 • 20 September 2024
Kabul Tarihi • Accepted	19 Ekim 2024 • 19 October 2024
Yayın Tarihi • Published	30 Haziran 2025 • 30 June 2025
Değerlendirme • Review	Çift Taraflı Kör • Double-Blind
Hakem • Peer-Review	Dış-Bağımsız • External-Independent
Benzerlik Taraması • Similarity Check	Tamamlandı • Completed
Etik Onay • Ethical Approval	Etik Gerekmez • Ethics Not Required
Çıkar Çatışması • Conflict of Interest	None • Yok
Finansman • Funding	Finansman Yok • No Funding
Lisans • License	Creative Commons BY-NC 4.0
Dergi İletişim • Journal Contact	https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/tmdrd

A b s t r a c t

The aim of this article is to examine the spiritual counseling and care services in Belgium. In this context, the history of spiritual counseling and care in Belgium, its areas of practice, and the challenges faced in services provided to Muslim minorities are discussed. Considering that this field is newly developing in Turkey, it is emphasized that benefiting from the experiences of countries with well-established practices is of great importance. Accordingly, the necessity of studies that will contribute to the Turkish literature on spiritual counseling and care services in Belgium is highlighted. The documentation technique was preferred in the article, and sources in Turkish, English, Dutch, and French containing information about spiritual counseling and care services in Belgium were utilized. Based on the findings, it has been determined that spiritual counselors in Belgium operate in churches, hospitals, social services, and prisons. These services play a significant role in meeting the psycho-spiritual needs of various segments of society. Additionally, it has been revealed that spiritual counseling and care services have a positive impact on individuals' psychological well-being. While there are many higher education institutions in Belgium that train spiritual counselors for Christian communities, there is no higher education program for training spiritual counselors to serve the Muslim minority group. However, some universities offer certificate programs, and relevant undergraduate and postgraduate programs are available at the Brussels Faculty of Islamic Sciences, established in 2007. This situation indicates that the institutionalization of spiritual counseling and care services for Muslim immigrant communities is limited. The most fundamental issue in services for Muslim immigrants is the training of qualified spiritual counselors. Although the Belgian government has permitted the establishment of institutions in this field, solutions regarding the recognition and equivalence of diplomas issued by these institutions remain insufficient. Furthermore, the lack of adequate roles assigned to Muslim counselors, especially in hospitals, stands out as another significant issue. These deficiencies restrict the access of Muslim immigrant communities to spiritual support services. In conclusion, despite the current challenges, positive developments are being observed in this field, and it can be predicted that Muslim immigrant communities in Belgium will be able to benefit more effectively from spiritual counseling and care services in the future. These developments will contribute to making the services more inclusive and sustainable. Moreover, equality-based approaches in service delivery will enhance respect for religious diversity.

K e y w o r d s

Spiritual counseling and care • Belgium • Muslim immigrants
Spiritual counselor • Institutionalization

Ö z e t

Bu makalenin amacı, Belçika'daki manevi danışmanlık ve rehberlik hizmetlerinin incelenmesidir. Bu kapsamda, Belçika'nın manevi danışmanlık ve rehberlik tarihi, uygulama alanları ve Müslüman azınlıklara yönelik hizmetlerde karşılaşılan sorunlar ele alınmıştır. Türkiye'de yeni gelişmekte olan bu alanın, köklü deneyimlere sahip ülkelerin tecrübelerinden yararlanılarak geliştirilmesi önem arz etmektedir. Bu doğrultuda, Belçika'daki hizmetlere ilişkin Türk manevi danışmanlık ve rehberlik literatürüne katkı sağlayacak çalışmaların gerekliliği vurgulanmaktadır. Makalede dokümantasyon tekniği tercih edilmiş olup Belçika'daki manevi danışmanlık ve rehberlik hizmetlerine ilişkin bilgiler içeren Türkçe, İngilizce, Felemenkçe ve Fransızca kaynaklardan yararlanılmıştır. Elde edilen bulgular doğrultusunda, Belçika'daki manevi danışmanların kilise hizmetleri, hastaneler, sosyal hizmetler ve cezaevlerinde faaliyet gösterdiği tespit edilmiştir. Bu hizmetlerin, toplumun çeşitli kesimlerinin psiko-spiritüel ihtiyaçlarını karşılamada önemli rol oynadığı belirlenmiştir. Ayrıca, manevi danışmanlık ve rehberlik hizmetlerinin bireylerin psikolojik iyilik halleri üzerinde olumlu etkiler yarattığı da ortaya konulmuştur. Belçika'da Hristiyanlara yönelik hizmet sunan manevi danışmanların yetiştirildiği birçok yükseköğretim kurumu bulunurken Müslüman azınlık gruba hizmet verecek manevi danışmanların yetiştirilmesine yönelik bir yükseköğretim programı mevcut değildir. Ancak bazı üniversitelerde sertifika programları düzenlenmekte olup 2007 yılında kurulan Brüksel İslami İlimler Fakültesi'nde ilgili lisans ve lisansüstü programlar bulunmaktadır. Bu durum, Müslüman göçmen topluluklara yönelik manevi danışmanlık ve rehberlik hizmetlerinin kurumsallaşmasının sınırlı olduğunu göstermektedir. Müslüman göçmenlere yönelik hizmetlerde karşılaşılan en temel sorun, uzman manevi danışmanların yetiştirilmesidir. Belçika hükümeti bu alanda eğitim kurumlarının kurulmasına izin vermiş olsa da, bu kurumların diplomalarının tanınması ve denklik sağlanması konusunda çözümler hala yetersiz kalmaktadır. Ayrıca, özellikle hastaneler başta olmak üzere birçok alanda Müslüman danışmanlara yeterince görev verilmemesi de önemli bir sorun olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Bu eksiklikler, Müslüman göçmen toplulukların manevi destek hizmetlerine erişimini kısıtlamaktadır. Sonuç olarak, güncel sorunlara rağmen bu alanda olumlu gelişmeler kaydedilmekte olup Belçika'daki Müslüman göçmen toplulukların gelecekte etkin manevi danışmanlık ve rehberlik hizmetlerinden yararlanabileceklerine ilişkin öngörülerde bulunulabilir. Bu gelişmeler, hizmetlerin daha kapsayıcı ve sürdürülebilir hale getirilmesine katkı sağlayacaktır. Ayrıca, hizmetteki eşitlikçi yaklaşımlar dini çeşitliliğe olan saygıyı artıracaktır.

A n a h t a r K e l i m e l e r

Manevi danışmanlık ve rehberlik • Belçika • Müslüman göçmenler
Manevi danışman • Kurumsallaşma

Introduction

In today's complex and rapidly changing world, individual's spiritual and emotional needs are increasing. Social pressures, personal difficulties, and the stresses of life can prevent individuals from reaching inner balance. At this point, spiritual care plays an important role. Spiritual counseling and care is defined as 'the professional and official guidance and assistance provided to people in making sense of their existence, based on faith and life views, and the professional advisory services regarding ethical and/or life-view aspects in care provision and policy formation.' (Doolard, 2006: 20).

Schilderman (2010: 24) defines spiritual counseling and care as care that considers the therapeutic importance of the process of finding meaning based on faith and life philosophy, in order to appropriately cope with various painful situations. The clinical object of care includes existential life themes that come with human destiny and demand meaning within the context of our religious and worldview-based traditions.

Spirituality is a deep inner dimension that adds meaning and purpose to a person's life (Toprak, 2018: 6). Spirituality is widely considered to be an inherent aspect of all individuals, regardless of their religious beliefs. This concept has a rich historical background. It originated in Christianity, where "the spiritual" was initially opposed to "the fleshly," which referred to worldly matters or anything that contradicted God's spirit. This distinction remained prevalent until the Middle Ages in Europe. The question "What is spirituality?" explores how the understanding of spirituality has evolved and examines current interpretations. Spirituality encompasses a holistic approach, involves the pursuit of meaning, is associated with personal growth, and promotes a self-reflective existence rather than an unexamined life. Within this framework, various religious spiritualities exist, including those of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism (Sheldrake, 2012).

Spiritual counseling and care help individuals discover these inner dimensions. Issues such as beliefs, values, search for meaning, and purpose in life are addressed during the spiritual counseling and care process. Individuals' identification of these internal values and integrating them into their lives can enable them to live a more satisfying and meaningful life (Koenig, 2002: 5).

Spiritual guidance and counseling also have a great impact on a societal level. The spiritual values of society affect people's inner worlds and relationships. Spiritual guidance and counseling can help strengthen the spiritual values of society and thus create a healthier and more resilient

society. When people find the inner balance provided by spirituality, social solidarity and understanding increase (Karaman, 2018: 13).

Spiritual counseling and care services help individuals understand their inner world, discover their spiritual values, make their lives meaningful, and support their personal development. In addition to meeting the spiritual needs of individuals, this field contributes to forming a healthier and more understanding society (Karlık & Kula, 2022: 105). Supporting spiritual guidance and counseling can help individuals live more meaningful, fulfilling, and happy lives. Therefore, developing and disseminating spiritual guidance and counseling can increase the general welfare of society. However, it is important to recognize that spiritual guidance and counseling may have limitations. For instance, it might not be effective for individuals who do not share the same spiritual beliefs or who prefer more conventional psychological approaches. Additionally, there can be a lack of standardized training and certification for spiritual counselors, which may affect the quality and consistency of the guidance provided. By acknowledging these limitations, we can ensure a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of the role of spiritual guidance and counseling in promoting societal welfare. (Gürsu vd., 2021: 297).

The field of spiritual guidance and counseling has recently begun to develop. The fact that many countries in the world have many years of experience in this field makes it necessary for countries that do not have sufficient experience in this field to benefit from this experience. Therefore, the problem of this study is to examine the spiritual guidance and counseling system of Belgium, which has significant experience in the field of spiritual guidance and counseling. This study aims to comprehensively examine spiritual counseling and care services in Belgium, with a particular focus on their historical development, the qualifications required to become a spiritual counselor, education and employment conditions, the distribution of religious spiritual counselors, as well as the content and structure of training programs in this field. Answers were sought to questions such as the characteristics of providing institutions, the development of spiritual counseling and care services for Muslims, problems related to these services, and future solution suggestions.

a. Methodology

The document analysis method was preferred to explain spiritual counseling and care, which has been practiced in Belgium and has centuries of experience, and to achieve the study's aim. Document analysis, as a scientific research method, refers to the process of collecting,

examining, questioning, and analyzing different documents as the primary source of research data (Sak vd., 2021: 242). The literature review examined 2 theses, 10 books, 13 articles, and 6 other academic sources related to spiritual counseling and care models in Belgium, utilizing the most appropriate sources for the research. 20% of the documents used within the scope of the study are articles written in Turkish, 10% are theses written in Turkish, 10% are books written in Turkish, 30% are articles written in languages other than Turkish, 20% are theses written in languages other than Turkish. and 10% consist of websites using a language other than Turkish. Although the languages used in resources written in languages other than Turkish are English, Dutch, and French, most of the resources are in French.

Since spiritual counseling and care models in Belgium have their origins in the Christian tradition, the sources are derived from literature based on the Bible and religious texts. This field is interdisciplinary, studies from different disciplines such as theology, psychology, pedagogy, and sociology were also considered in the literature. The educational programs of various academic institutions were researched to examine spiritual counseling and care services, and their common points were collectively determined.

b. History of Spiritual Counseling and Care in Belgium

It has been determined that in Belgium, before the 1970s, people who needed spiritual counseling and care were generally visited by the priests of the church community, and the priests carried out the task of spiritual counseling and care. However, after the 1970s, the demand for spiritual counseling and care services within hospitals increased and people were provided with support appropriate to their beliefs, usually through priests. With the law called "De Omzendbrief De Saegher" published on April 5, 1973, the right of individuals from different religions to access spiritual counseling and care was protected. Still, the fact that institutions were not obliged to provide personnel for pastoral care reduced the effect of the law (Jonge, 2012). In Belgium, where professional spiritual counseling and care is offered mostly by Roman Catholics and Humanists, the increasing role of lay women in spiritual counseling and care indicates a paradigm shift from the late 1980s onwards. The emergence of secular pastoral duties in the mid-1980s gained increasing momentum with the synod of bishops in 1987 on the possibility of laity becoming spiritual advisors (Vandenhoeck, 2020: 129-130). After the 2000s, changes in Belgium's population structure and the decrease in the Christian population have led to the emergence of a new perspective on spiritual counseling and care. According to the latest census

results (WPR, 2024), there has been a significant decline in the number of people identifying as Christian, with an increase in those identifying with other religions or none at all. Today, although Christian pastors continue to dominate the spiritual advisors in Belgium, spiritual advisors from other religions have also begun to be recognized as official civil servants and supported by the Belgian state. As of 2015, with radical Islam posing a serious threat in Europe, the idea of using Islamic spiritual counselors as a precaution against it has become widespread, and the way has been opened for spiritual counselors who provide spiritual counseling and care services for both Muslims and other religions in Belgium. (Castel, 2021: 13-14).

c. Prerequisites for Serving as a Spiritual Counselor in Belgium

Providing a definitive answer regarding the qualifications for becoming a spiritual advisor in Belgium is not feasible. First, since the conditions for becoming a pastor have varied in the past years, the answer to this question is given only in terms of today's conditions. It was later determined that the conditions for becoming a spiritual advisor are different for Christians and people of other religions. To be appointed as a pastor, Christians must first complete an undergraduate or graduate program in theology. They must then apply to the Consistory to receive approval from the church at national and local levels. After this process, they can become pastors if they are chosen by the church community (Flachon, 2014: 25). For Muslims and spiritual advisors of other religions, the conditions are not as harsh as for Christian pastors. The reason for this is that while it is easy to find a Christian pastor, it is difficult to find a spiritual counselor who will provide spiritual counseling and care services to other religions. While Christian pastors require a bachelor's or master's degree in theology, these conditions are not necessary for those who will provide spiritual counseling and care services to people of other religions. These people are required to graduate from a religion-related undergraduate program in Belgium or another country where they will provide spiritual counseling and care and ensure language proficiency. One can potentially become a spiritual counselor serving Muslims upon completing the 4-year undergraduate program titled "Language and Regional Studies Undergraduate: Arabic and Islamic Studies" at KU Leuven University in Belgium, which encompasses a total of 180 credits."

In addition, it is possible to apply to become a spiritual advisor in Belgium by graduating from the graduate or undergraduate programs of the Brussels Faculty of Islamic Sciences, which is affiliated with the European Islamic University in the Netherlands (Dönmez, 2021: 40-41).

Moreover, in recent years, the requirement for actively working spiritual advisors to have a graduation degree at least at the primary school level and to pass the language test has been introduced in Belgium. Foreign spiritual advisors actively working to meet this condition were given the right to take graduation exams, and spiritual advisors who successfully passed these exams were allowed to continue their duties (Sarı, 2024).

d. Employment Opportunities and Institutional Settings for Spiritual Counselors in Belgium

Different information has been obtained regarding the employment of spiritual advisors working in Belgium. The reason for obtaining different information is that employment types vary according to religions and areas of service. In Belgium, Christian pastors apply to the Consistoire to be appointed. Pastors accepted here are employed to serve in four different areas: church services, hospitals, neighborhood services, and prisons. Pastors assigned to these areas work full-time and on a permanent basis (Chevalier, 2014: 316). Muslims, on the other hand, apply to the institution called Exécutif des musulmans de Belgique (EMB) to be appointed as spiritual advisors. If the institution deems it appropriate, their appointments are made. However, with the Royal Decree dated 12 June 2023, the recognition of this institution by the Belgian State was abolished. Instead of this institution, the Council of Muslims called Moslimraad van België (MB) was recognized and this institution was responsible for the induction of spiritual advisors (Vlaanderen, 2023a). While Christian pastors work full-time in all institutions in Belgium, spiritual counselors serving other religions are often employed part-time when needed, except in prisons. While pastors who provide spiritual counseling and care services for Christians work full-time in hospitals, spiritual counselors who provide spiritual counseling and care services for other religions are available upon request of patients (Schoutheete, 2012: 14-16).

While the Belgian state has positioned Christian pastors as civil servants in the past years, it has positioned spiritual advisors from other religions as an auxiliary service group whose services are consulted when needed (Husson & Mandin, 2014: 70). In recent years, due to the danger of radical Islamic movements that have emerged in Europe, the Belgian state wanted to give a status to Islamic spiritual advisors as a precaution but with the thought that this situation would discriminate against other religions, it was decided to give the same status to spiritual advisors of all religions (Castel, 2021: 13-14). In this respect, as of 2023, all spiritual advisors working in Belgium have the status of civil servants,

and their salaries are paid by the state through the institutions to which they are affiliated.

It has been determined that spiritual counselors in Belgium provide services in many areas (neighborhood services, churches, schools, nursing homes, army), mostly hospitals and prisons. Although hospitals and prisons are separated from other service areas, other service areas are often intertwined (Vicariat BW, 2023). For example, a pastor who works in church services may also be assigned to perform a service within the scope of neighborhood services. Similarly, a pastor working in neighborhood services can visit nursing homes with people who want to provide pastoral services voluntarily. In this respect, although it can be said that spiritual counselors do not have significant differences according to the areas they serve, it can be stated that the job descriptions of pastors and spiritual counselors working in prisons and hospitals are clearer.

e. Religious Affiliation and Distribution of Spiritual Counselors in Belgium

A significant part of the Belgian population is Christian (Vandewiele, 2018). In this respect, most pastors are expected to provide spiritual counseling and care services to Christians. However, in past years, although there was a population other than Christians, almost all spiritual advisors were Christian pastors. There were also spiritual advisors from other religions, but it was necessary to make a special request to receive service from them. As of today, there are spiritual counselors in prisons for followers of all religions (Vlaanderen, 2023a). However, since there are officially only Christian pastors in institutions other than prisons, it can be stated that there are not enough spiritual counselors for followers of other religions in these institutions.

In recent years, there has been increasing recognition of the need for a more diverse representation of spiritual counselors in Belgium's public institutions. Efforts have been made to include chaplains from non-Christian backgrounds, particularly in response to the growing Muslim, Jewish, and secular populations. Despite these initiatives, the integration of non-Christian spiritual counselors remains limited due to bureaucratic and institutional constraints. Many non-Christian spiritual advisors still face challenges in obtaining official recognition and funding, which affects their ability to provide comprehensive services in hospitals, elderly care facilities, and other public institutions.

Moreover, the availability of spiritual counseling services for non-religious individuals remains a subject of ongoing debate. While secular

counseling options exist, they are often not integrated into the same institutional frameworks as religious counseling. This discrepancy highlights the need for a more inclusive approach to spiritual and existential care, ensuring that individuals from all belief systems—whether religious or secular—have equal access to qualified counselors who can address their spiritual and psychological needs in a supportive environment.

f. Educational Framework for Spiritual Counseling and Care Training in Belgium

It has been determined that there are many regions in Belgium where different languages are spoken, and different spiritual beliefs exist. These differences between regions cause differences in the training programs developed for spiritual counseling and care education. For example, in 1992, in the Archdiocese of Malines-Bruxelles, "Formation à l'animation pastorale (F.A.P.)", a special training program of 150 hours spread over two years for all spiritual counselors, was launched. Then in 2000, this program doubled the number of hours to expand theological training doubled and spread over four years. In the Archdiocese of Liège, the "Institut supérieur de catéchèse et de pastorale", which offers a 450-hour training program including internships according to different options (such as neighborhood, youth, health, and prison), was launched in 1997, and a reform aimed at expanding theological education was initiated in 2007. The Archdiocese of Tournai began by offering candidates customized training programs and developed regular training sessions, introducing an initial 150-hour training period in 2007. The Archdiocese of Namur trained spiritual counselors with a 300-hour training program without offering a special training program for many years, but since 2011, it has created an institution that makes spiritual counseling and care training more professional with the "Institut diocésain de formation" (Chevalier, 2014: 317).

There is also spiritual counseling and care training provided by independent institutions without the coordination of archdioceses. Academic certificates such as the "Certificat en théologie pastorale (CeTP)" offered by the Faculté de théologie can be cited as examples of these training programs. Additionally, in 2013, a university certificate, the "Certificat universitaire de la pastorale santé (CUPS)", began to be issued for spiritual counselors who wish to work in health. This certificate refers to a training program for people who want to participate in the health-related spiritual counseling and care services of the church or spiritual counselors who provide health services. This program meets the educational needs of individuals seeking to gain competency in matters such as church health care and patient visiting. CUPS is presented

as a document of education and competencies in this field (Chevalier, 2014: 318-319).

In recent years, graduate programs for spiritual counselor training have been opened in Belgium. One of these programs is the master's program opened by the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Leuven. This master's program aims to broaden and deepen the initial training of students with training in theology and religious studies acquired at KU Leuven or elsewhere. Other aims of the program are to prepare students to conduct independent research in various areas of theology and religious studies and to enable them to serve as experts in the church and society. Within the program's scope, students have the opportunity to specialize in one of the faculty's five research disciplines or main topics and write a master's thesis. These fields are biblical studies, systematic theology and the study of religions, theological and comparative ethics, the history of the church and theology, and pastoral and experimental theology. The curriculum offers a general orientation to the interdisciplinary academic study of the Christian faith tradition in a multicultural and multi-religious social context. This program can be followed full-time or part-time (KU Leuven, 2023).

In addition to KU Leuven University, some universities in Belgium provide spiritual counselor training, such as Université Catholique de Louvain and Louvain-la-Neuve. These universities aim to train spiritual counselors, in other words, pastors, according to the Christian faith. Although there is no undergraduate or graduate program in Belgium specifically aimed at training spiritual counselors for religions other than Christianity, there are certain programs within universities that allow spiritual counseling and care.

g. Provision of Spiritual Counseling and Care Services for Muslim Communities in Belgium

It has been determined that, although the Belgian State recognizes Islam as a second religion, it has not been able to make practical progress in services for Muslims for many years due to its Catholic Christian-oriented political structure. Although there are many educational institutions to meet the spiritual advisor needs of individuals belonging to the Christian religion, a similar service is not provided for Muslims. When the need for spiritual advisors of the Muslim community arose, the Belgian State requested spiritual advisors from countries such as Turkey, Algeria, Morocco, North Africa, and Tunisia to solve this problem (Husson, 2006: 44-45). However, the fact that these foreign consultants brought their own culture instead of integrating into the Belgian

culture, the difference in the religious education they received, their unfamiliarity with the living conditions and laws of Belgium, and their lack of knowledge of the cultural and socio-political structure of Belgium caused problems (Battiui & Kanmaz, 2004: 15). This situation has led to religious disagreements and the spread of religious discourses and fatwas that have nothing to do with the position of the country they serve. For this reason, the Belgian State has required those who will undertake the role of spiritual counseling and care to learn the language, culture, and legal regulations of the region in which they are located to communicate effectively with local communities (Husson & Mandin, 2014: 134). In this regard, Belgian authorities decided to establish educational institutions by focusing on the training of spiritual advisors who can communicate better with the society, instead of officials coming from foreign countries (Husson, 2006: 23). Following this decision of the Belgian State, IKM, which was affiliated with the World Islamic Union in 1978, started to train spiritual counselors by establishing AIE to serve Muslims. However, their diplomas were not accepted because the institute could not provide education following the requirements of Belgium. Despite this situation, IKM continued its aim of training religious and spiritual personnel with its AIE until 1989-1990 and continued to send personnel to various institutions (Dönmez, 2021: 37).

In 1992, an interim BEC was elected to deal with the appointment of spiritual advisors, but it was not officially recognized. In 1994, EMB was established as a result of an election with the participation of the Muslim community, and in 1999 it was officially recognized and accepted as the sole authorized representative. In addition, the state has allocated a budget to this institution to be used during the year (Sagesser and Torrekens, 2008: 12-41). In 2000, the requests of Muslim prisoners in prisons for spiritual counsel were accepted by a law in 2005 (Bertrand & Clinaz, 2015: 31). Therefore, in 2005, a law was passed to officially recognize staff who provide special spiritual counseling and care services for individuals with different religious beliefs in hospitals, elderly care homes, and prisons. This legal regulation includes spiritual advisors being granted civil servant status and receiving financial support (Husson & Mandin, 2014: 70).

In the early 2000s, the Belgian State's acceptance of spiritual advisors to serve Muslims led to the establishment of many educational institutions. However, these institutions were inadequate in training spiritual advisors (Battiui & Kanmaz, 2004: 23). In 2006, the CISMOC Research Center at the Catholic University in Belgium started a program called "Continuing Education in Religious Sciences" in order to solve this

problem of the state. This program has been an important step to fill the gap in Belgium in training religious officials (Dönmez, 2021: 39).

Another effort to train spiritual advisors to serve Muslims in Belgium is the Brussels Faculty of Islamic Sciences, which was established in 2007 as part of the European Islamic University in the Netherlands, to adapt its graduate and undergraduate programs to the Bologna education system standards. The faculty aims to train high-level religious officials and spiritual advisors in Belgium and has developed an alternative master's degree program in cooperation with the European Islamic University. Although there is no undergraduate or graduate program for spiritual counselors to serve Muslims in Belgium, universities such as Université Saint-Louis- Bruxelles, Université Catholique de Louvain, Université Libre de Bruxelles offer certificate programs (Dönmez, 2021: 40).

Although there are many problems regarding spiritual counseling and care services for Muslims in Belgium, it seems that the most fundamental problem encountered is the issue of qualified training of spiritual counselors. Although the Belgian government has allowed the establishment of institutions to provide training for individuals who will provide spiritual counseling and care services to the Muslim community, it has not yet found a solution for the recognition or equivalence of the diplomas issued by these institutions. This situation shows that Belgium remains behind compared to its neighboring countries Germany, France, and the Netherlands. Although these countries do not officially recognize Islam, they have collaborated with Muslim educational institutions to train Muslim religious officials and spiritual advisors. As in the case of the Netherlands, the Dutch government has officially recognized the diplomas of Muslim educational institutions active in this field. For example, the recognition of the diplomas of the Rotterdam Islamic University's master's program can be shown as a success story of this cooperation (Heuts vd., 2012: 27). In this context, addressing the challenges in Belgium necessitates effective collaboration between Muslim educational institutions that train spiritual counselors and the country's Ministry of Education. Because the necessity of training religious officials and spiritual advisors to serve the Muslim community in Belgium has become a generally accepted reality and this view has been supported by the public. In addition, recognition of the diplomas of academic Islamic educational institutions that strive to train qualified personnel will create a solid basis for cooperation. In this way, new opportunities will arise for religious officials and spiritual advisors who will provide religious services in a qualified manner.

h. Critical Analysis and Findings

It is seen that in many countries in Europe, as in Belgium, Catholic Christians dominate the field of spiritual counseling and care. As determined in this research, the influence of Catholics in this field has decreased in recent years and the weight of secular spiritual advisors and spiritual advisors from other religions has begun to increase. For example, Tinmaz (2019: 9-10) stated in his study that 70% of the population of France in 1981 was Catholic and the majority of spiritual advisors were Catholic. According to a study conducted in 2008, while the rate of Catholics in France was 34%, this rate decreased to 32% in 2018. Moreover, more than half of these people only describe themselves as Catholics, but do not go to church even on the most important religious days. The number of Jews and Protestants is declining, as is the number of Catholics. The proportion of Buddhist and Hindu population is estimated at 0.5%. The proportion of the Muslim population is determined as 6%. The proportion of Muslims in France's major cities reaches 13%. However, the rate of religiosity is highest among Muslims compared to other religious groups. Indeed, nearly half of Muslims living in France pray every day. The proportion of French irreligious people has increased greatly in the last forty years, rising from 27% to 58%. The non-religious group includes atheists, agnostics, and deists. Approximately half of the individuals who define themselves as non-religious were raised in Catholic religious families. As a result of all these, Catholics in France, who were once dominant in the field of spiritual counseling and care, have now lost this advantage. In another example, the situation of spiritual counseling and care institutions in Germany was examined and similarly, while Christians were predominant in the field of spiritual counseling and care in the past, with the decline of Christian religiosity in Germany and the increase in the proportion of members of other religions, the number of spiritual counselors providing spiritual counseling and care services to members of other religions has increased since the 2000s. has started. When all these are evaluated together, it can be stated that similar processes have been experienced in almost all countries of Europe, and while spiritual counseling and care was initially aimed only at Christianity, after the 2000s, spiritual counseling and care was seen as a right for members of other religions and philosophical movements (Özmen-Yaylak, 2021).

The requirements for becoming a spiritual advisor appear to be fundamentally similar in almost all European countries. What is meant by basic similarity is that being a spiritual advisor in all countries is tied to university-level education. However, there are significant differences

between countries in terms of the content of the training provided. Moreover, even in the same country, it appears that there are different educational contents in training spiritual advisors who will serve spiritual advisors from different religions. For example, while it is possible to become a spiritual counselor providing services to Christians by completing a three-year undergraduate education, two-year or one-year education programs in France Tinmaz (2019: 110), in Belgium it is possible to become a spiritual counselor providing spiritual counseling and care services to Christians. It is required to have a bachelor's degree in theology or a master's degree. While it is possible to become a spiritual counselor in France with short-term training in addition to a 3-year undergraduate education in order to become a spiritual counselor serving members of other religions Tinmaz (2019: 111), in Belgium, after 4 years of undergraduate education, you can meet certain conditions or take part in some certificate programs. It is possible to become a spiritual advisor by participating. When all these are evaluated together, it can be stated that spiritual counseling and care is considered a professional profession in European countries and university education is a must to become a spiritual counselor. In addition, it can be said that more comprehensive training is given at the university level regarding spiritual counseling and care for Christians, but for other religions and philosophical movements, the requirement to become a spiritual counselor can be fulfilled with short-term training after graduating from undergraduate education.

It is seen that spiritual counseling and care services are provided in many European countries in areas similar to Belgium, and in these countries, as in Belgium, different methods are used in the employment of spiritual counselors serving different religions and philosophical movements. For example, in the Netherlands, a different institution is responsible for each religion or belief group in the process of appointing spiritual advisors to official institutions. In the Netherlands, there are separate appointment institutions for the church, humanists, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists, and the employment of spiritual advisors is provided by these institutions (Karagöl, 2012: 24). In Belgium, there are institutions responsible for the appointment of Christian, humanist, Muslim, and Jewish spiritual advisors, but there are no such institutions for the others (Vlaanderen, 2023b). In addition, while designated institutions in the Netherlands can make appointments in all fields, in Belgium most institutions include only Christian spiritual advisors. When people from other religions want to receive spiritual counseling and care services, the relevant institution provides this service externally. When

all these are evaluated together, it can be stated that there are many deficiencies in the employment of spiritual counselors in Belgium, that more spiritual counselors from religions other than Christianity should be appointed, and that spiritual counselors who will provide spiritual counseling and care services to people with different views other than the specified religions should be appointed.

It seems that there are two types of approaches in the positioning of spiritual advisors by states. The first type of approach is that spiritual advisors are hired by the religious institutions they are affiliated with and their salaries are paid from the budget of these institutions. While this practice was valid in many European countries, including Belgium, in the past years, centralized payment practice has started to be preferred by many countries in recent years due to the disadvantages caused by this practice. For example, in the Netherlands, before 1996, the salaries of spiritual advisors were paid by the religious institutions they were affiliated with, but after 1996, payments began to be made by the state from a single center (Karagül, 2012: 25). In France, while spiritual advisors are employed as civil servants in some institutions such as the army, many Muslim spiritual advisors, especially in prisons, are not civil servants and this situation poses a significant problem for spiritual advisors (Tınmaz, 2019: 78-79). Although the conditions in Belgium are not as good as in the Netherlands, they are not as negative as in France. While the salaries of permanent spiritual advisors in Belgium are covered regularly every month by the MKB, daily wages are paid to these spiritual advisors if external spiritual advisors are requested, especially in institutions such as hospitals where spiritual advisors of all religions are not available (Schoutheete, 2012: 14-16). When all these are evaluated together, it can be stated that Belgium is in a good situation among European countries in terms of the employment problem of spiritual counselors, but spiritual counselors other than Christian spiritual counselors should also be employed, especially in health institutions.

It is observed that the issue of spiritual advisor representation in Belgium is also prevalent in many other European countries. For instance, Özmen-Yaylak (2021: 6) found that, although spiritual counseling and care services in Germany are predominantly controlled by Christians due to the country's historical background, members of other religions also utilize these services as per their needs. However, the study concluded that, particularly in the healthcare sector, Germany lacks sufficient spiritual advisors and guides to meet the needs of the Muslim community. As a result of his study, Tınmaz (2019: 113-116) concluded that there is an insufficient number of spiritual advisors for all religions in France. This is also due to the fact that France does not allocate enough

budget to spiritual advisors in accordance with the principle of secularism. The main source of the representation problem in Belgium is Belgium's Catholic-dominated political structure. Although the representation problem experienced in Belgium in recent years has begun to be partially overcome, there are serious representation problems, especially in the health sector. When both Belgium and other European countries are evaluated together, it can be stated that if they provide quality spiritual counseling and care services offered to Christians for members of other religions, they will largely overcome the representation problem.

It is seen that there is a spiritual counseling and care structure similar to the one in Belgium in many European countries (Germany, Netherlands, France, Türkiye). There are some differences only depending on the religious and political structure of the countries. For example, since Belgium has a Catholic-dominated religious structure, spiritual counseling and care services are generally provided by pastors appointed by churches, while in Turkey spiritual counseling and care services are mostly provided within the framework of Islamic understanding (Altıntaş, 2018: 223). Similarly, while the development of spiritual counseling and care in Germany is based on Christianity Ağıkaya-Sahin (2016: 48), a secular perspective is adopted in France (Tınmaz, 2019: 91). Despite these differences, in all of these countries, spiritual counseling and care services are provided in hospitals, prisons, armies, social service institutions, and places of religious worship (churches, mosques, synagogues).

It is seen that there is a spiritual counseling and care structure similar to the one in Belgium in many European countries (Germany, Netherlands, France, Turkey). There are some differences only depending on the religious and political structure of the countries. For example, since Belgium has a Catholic-dominated religious structure, spiritual counseling and care services are generally provided by pastors appointed by churches, while in Turkey spiritual counseling and care services are mostly provided within the framework of Islamic understanding (Altıntaş, 2018: 223). Similarly, while the development of spiritual counseling and care in Germany is based on Christianity Ağıkaya-Sahin (2016: 48), a secular perspective is adopted in France (Tınmaz, 2019: 91). Despite these differences, in all of these countries, spiritual counseling and care services are provided in hospitals, prisons, armies, social service institutions, and places of religious worship (churches, mosques, synagogues).

It is seen that spiritual counseling and care services for Muslims have been developing from the past to the present in many European countries, such as Belgium. In the past, when spiritual counseling and care

was mentioned in many European countries, it was understood as spiritual counseling and care services for Christians, but today spiritual counseling and care services are provided to individuals with many religions and many different beliefs. Therefore, these developments in Europe have had a positive impact on spiritual counseling and care services for Muslims in Belgium. In addition, after 2015, European governments realized that spiritual counseling and care services could be effective against the increasing threat of radical Islam in the world, and therefore spiritual counseling and care services for Muslims were encouraged in Belgium (Castel, 2021: 13-14). It can be stated that this may be one of the reasons why Muslim spiritual advisors are encouraged in prisons in Belgium, where radical Islamic thought can be influential, but the predominance of Christian pastors is maintained in other institutions.

It is seen that problems similar to those experienced in Belgium are experienced in many European countries in meeting the need for spiritual advisors of Muslims. For example, Özmen-Yaylak (2021: 6) stated that, as a result of his study, there are not enough spiritual advisors and guides to meet the needs of the Muslim community in Germany, especially in the health sector. As a result of his study, Tınmaz (2019: 113-116) stated that the number of Muslim spiritual counselors in France is quite low and that most of these counselors are not able to continue spiritual counseling and care after a while because they already provide consultancy on a voluntary basis.

The most important problem in Belgium regarding spiritual counseling and care services for Muslims is the issue of training spiritual counselors in a qualified manner. Belgium has fallen behind in this regard compared to its neighboring countries, Germany, France, and the Netherlands. Although these countries do not officially recognize Islam, they have collaborated with Muslim educational institutions to train Muslim religious officials and spiritual advisors. As in the case of the Netherlands, the Dutch government has officially recognized the diplomas of Muslim educational institutions active in this field. For example, the recognition of the diplomas of the Rotterdam Islamic University's master's program can be shown as a success story of this cooperation (Heuts vd., 2012: 27). In this context, to solve the problems in Belgium, it is of great importance that Muslim educational institutions that train spiritual counselors cooperate effectively with the country's Ministry of Education. Because the necessity of training spiritual advisors to serve the Muslim community in Belgium has become a generally accepted reality and this view has been supported by the public. In addition, recognition of the diplomas of academic Islamic educational institutions that

strive to train qualified personnel will create a solid basis for cooperation. In this way, new opportunities will arise for religious officials and spiritual advisors who will provide religious services in a qualified manner.

Conclusion

In this article, the spiritual counseling and care services in Belgium was examined in line with the research questions determined within the scope of the study. Additionally, spiritual counseling and care services for Muslims in Belgium are also discussed. Although Belgium has had a spiritual counseling and care system for many years, there are numerous persistent problems that have not been adequately addressed. However, in recent years, there has been a more determined effort to resolve these issues. This renewed focus includes concrete steps and policies aimed at improving the spiritual counseling and care system for all believers, regardless of their religious affiliation.

The study highlights specific initiatives taken to enhance the quality and accessibility of spiritual counseling and care services. For example, the Belgian government has increased funding for training spiritual counseling and care providers, established more inclusive policies that respect diverse religious practices, and created platforms for dialogue between different religious communities. These measures are intended to ensure that spiritual counseling and care services are more responsive to the needs of all believers, including Muslims.

The findings of this article suggest that, despite the ongoing challenges, there is a positive trajectory towards addressing the shortcomings of the spiritual counseling and care system in Belgium. The involvement of various stakeholders, including religious leaders, policymakers, and community organizations, indicates a collective commitment to fostering a more inclusive and effective spiritual counseling and care framework. Consequently, the future of spiritual counseling and care in Belgium appears promising, with substantial improvements anticipated through continued collaboration and targeted interventions.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made to enhance the field of spiritual counseling and care for Muslim communities in Belgium. These suggestions aim to improve institutional recognition, training, and accessibility while promoting inclusivity and further research in the field:

(i)-Given the lack of structured higher education programs for Muslim spiritual counselors in Belgium, universities should collaborate with

Islamic institutions to develop accredited degree programs in spiritual counseling and care that meet national and international standards.

(ii)-The Belgian government should establish official recognition and standardization of diplomas for spiritual counselors, ensuring parity between Christian and Muslim professionals in terms of employment and institutional roles in spiritual counseling and care.

(iii)-Public institutions, including hospitals and correctional facilities, should implement policies to integrate Muslim spiritual counselors into their systems, ensuring equal access to spiritual counseling and care services for all religious groups.

(iv)-Promoting interfaith dialogue and cooperation among spiritual counselors from different religious backgrounds can lead to more inclusive and effective spiritual counseling and care practices across diverse communities.

(v)-Further empirical studies should be conducted to assess the psychological, social, and spiritual benefits of spiritual counseling and care provided by spiritual counselors for Muslim minorities, contributing to the broader discourse on religious and psychological well-being in multicultural societies.

Beyanlar ve Bildirimler | Statements & Declarations –

Etik Onay | Ethical Approval

Bu çalışma etik onay gerektirmemektedir.

This study does not require ethical approval.

Araştırma Etiği Beyanı | Research Ethics Statement

Bu çalışma, uluslararası akademik etik ilkelerine uygun olarak yürütülmüştür.

This study was conducted in accordance with international academic ethical principles.

Bilgilendirilmiş Onam | Informed Consent

Bu çalışma için bilgilendirilmiş onam gerekli değildir.

Informed consent was not required for this study.

Katılım Onayı | Consent to Participate

Bu çalışma için katılım onayı gerekli değildir.

Consent to participate was not required for this study.

Yayın Onayı | Consent for Publication

Yazar(lar), bu makalenin yayınlanmasına tam onay vermektedir.

The author(s) give their full consent for the publication of this article in its current form.

Çıkar Çatışması | Conflict of Interest

Yazar(lar), bu makalenin araştırma, yazarlık ve/veya yayını ile ilgili herhangi bir çıkar çatışması bulunmadığını beyan eder.

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Rekabetçi Çıkarlar | Competing Interests

Yazar(lar), bu araştırmaya ilişkin herhangi bir rekabetçi menfaatlerinin bulunmadığını belirtir.

The author(s) declare that they have no competing interests.

Şeffaflık Beyanı | Transparency Statement

Yazar(lar), çalışmanın tüm aşamalarında şeffaflık ilkesine bağlı kalmışlardır.

The author(s) confirm that transparency principles were followed at all stages of this research.

Finansman | Funding

Bu çalışma herhangi bir finansal destek almamıştır.

This research received no financial support.

Veri Paylaşımı ve Erişilebilirlik | Data Availability & Accessibility

Bu çalışmada veri paylaşımı mevcut değildir.

Data sharing is not available for this study.

Yazar Katkıları | Author Contributions

Kavramsallaştırma: SS-TŞ; Literatür Taraması: SS; Veri Toplama: SS; Veri Analizi: SS-TŞ; Yazım – Taslak: SS; Yazım – Gözden Geçirme – Düzenleme: SS-TŞ.

Conceptualization: SS-TŞ; Literature Review: SS; Data Collection: SS; Data Analysis: SS-TŞ; Writing – Draft: SS; Writing – Review – Editing: SS-TŞ.

Özgünlük Beyanı | Statement of Originality

Bu makale, sorumlu yazarın İstanbul Sabahattin Zaim Üniversitesi'nde tamamladığı “Belçika'da Manevi Danışmanlık Uygulamaları” başlıklı yüksek lisans tezinden üretilmiştir.

This article is derived from the corresponding author's master's thesis titled “Spiritual Counseling Practices in Belgium”, completed at İstanbul Sabahattin Zaim University.

Çalışma Sınırlılıkları | Study Limitations

Bu araştırmanın bazı metodolojik sınırlılıkları bulunmaktadır ve gelecekteki çalışmalar için öneriler içermektedir.

This study has some methodological limitations and provides recommendations for future research.

Açık Bilim Beyanı | Open Science Statement

Bu çalışma, açık bilim ilkelerine uygun olarak yürütülmüş ve verilerin paylaşımı araştırma etik kuralları çerçevesinde değerlendirilmiştir.

This study was conducted in compliance with open science principles, and data sharing has been evaluated within the framework of research ethics guidelines.

Erişim Politikası | Access Policy

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