



ARMY CHAPLAINS LEADING FROM THE MIDDLE

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Those who neglect religion in their analyses of contemporary affairs do so at great peril.

—Madeleine Albright¹

We are building morale—not on supreme confidence in our ability to conquer and subdue other peoples; not in reliance on things of steel and the super-excellence of guns and planes and bomb sights . . . We are building it on belief, for it is what men believe that makes them invincible. We have sought for something finer and higher than optimism or self-confidence, something not merely of the intellect or the emotions but rather something in the spirit of the man, something encompassed only by the soul.

—General George C. Marshall²

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PHOTO: U.S. Army Chaplain (CPT) Jeff Roberson speaks to a female resident and her daughter while conducting a sensing patrol of the Iraqi Family Village, a neighborhood of displaced citizens in Baghdad, Iraq, on 11 September 2008. (U.S. Army, SPC Charles W. Gill)

IN HIS ESSAY “Leading Our Leaders” (*Military Review*, September-October 2009), Professor Tim Challans advances an argument that, during the last decade, senior military leaders set conditions for moral and legal failures in our junior enlisted ranks. I want to address four of his points here:

- He concludes that leaders are accountable to those above and below them for moral failures, and that improving ethics in the Army must start, not from the top or the bottom, but in the middle.
- Based on a narrow reading of the role of chaplains, the article asks if it is time to eliminate the Chaplain Corps.
- The article asserts (without documentation) that the Chaplain Corps “led the charge in ensuring that the concept of respect did not include any idea of respecting the enemy.”³
- The article presents “torture, murder, slavery, and general disrespect of persons” by Al-Qaeda as an example of religion’s negative influence on behavior.⁴

Serving in the Middle

Regarding the article’s main point, cultivating moral strength “in the middle” of military formations, this approach reinforces the historic role of chaplains. Chaplains today and in the past have worked “in the middle” of units where they live and serve among Soldiers. For 234 years, Army commanders have called upon chaplains in their formations to address ethical questions and foster a moral climate that would support developing

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moral character. Chief of Staff of the Army General George C. Marshall, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, institutionalized the method of assigning chaplains to units in the Army.⁵

Chaplains across the force serve “in the middle” of units with Soldiers and are addressed as “chaplain,” not by rank—another example of Marshall’s influence that conveys the chaplain’s distinctive role. Chaplains encourage both faith among believers and ethical conduct among all Soldiers and family members. Chaplain support sometimes expands to prisoners of war, detained persons, and refugees. Their example in this regard models the ethical posture they seek to reinforce among Soldiers. Fostering moral strength “in the middle” of our military aligns with the institution’s expectations of the chaplaincy.

Eliminate the Chaplain Corps?

“Leading Our Leaders” also suggests that moral and leadership failures of the U.S. military are potentially the result of damaging influences by military chaplains and religion. The article decries chaplains who, from the author’s perspective, inappropriately engage in policy development, moral leadership development, and ethics education through contributions in preparing regulations and through counseling. The article asks if all other activities of chaplains beyond leading religious services are out of bounds and should be removed from public, government, and military life.

The article incorrectly attributes a 1986 court case, *Katcoff v. Marsh*, to the Supreme Court. However, the case was decided by the Federal Court of Appeals, 2d Circuit, New York City. The article accurately notes the court’s rationale for retaining the Army chaplaincy. The military chaplain’s “primary role” (not exclusive role) is to provide for the free exercise of religion, particularly of deployed military personnel.⁶ Though the article asks what leaders can do when policy undermines

morality, along the way it challenges the existence of the Chaplain Corps. The article asks, “Why [do] we even have a Chaplain Corps, particularly one engaged in the formulation of doctrine?”⁷

This question signals concern about an overly influential Chaplain Corps operating outside accepted limits. For example, Challans states the current Field Manual (FM) 6-22, *Army Leadership*, “contains language that opens the door and enables religious beliefs to be foundational in our institutional professional conception of ethics.”⁸ What the FM actually states about the “Foundations of Army Leadership . . .” is, “Although America’s history and cultural traditions derive from many parts of the civilized world, common values, goals, and beliefs are solidly established in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.”⁹ Citing the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution hardly weds religious beliefs too closely to the professional military ethic.

Others directly involved in the conferences the author mentions can comment on the accuracy of the article’s statements regarding the old leadership manual’s staffing process (FM 22-100) in the late 1990s. However, doctrinal decisions about what is included in major military publications are not determined at a chaplain branch conference. Doctrine development is an iterative process involving scores of experts—a process unlikely to be overly influenced by chaplains.

Respecting the Enemy

The article also refers to prepublication staffing for the 1999 FM 22-100 and the 2006 FM 6-22 leadership manuals and asserts that “the Chaplain Corps was incensed” and argued against the foundational principle of the moral equality of enemy combatants and detained personnel.¹⁰

This charge is serious. It asserts that the Chaplain Corps—as an institution—does not respect enemy combatants or accept their moral equivalence in conflict. If such a charge has any purchase whatsoever, the Chaplain Corps would need to come to grips with all the implications of this accusation. Perhaps *individuals* have raised questions about moral equivalence of adversaries in the War on Terrorism, but the Army’s Chaplain Corps has not adopted a position repudiating the moral worth of enemy personnel.

Concerning respect for the enemy, consider two examples of chaplain conduct and current chaplain training in respect for all people, including enemy personnel. Chaplain Henry Gerecke was assigned at Nuremberg to provide chaplaincy services among enemy prisoners on trial for war crimes.¹¹ He was trusted both by the Nuremberg tribunal authorities and the prisoners as a confidant, pastor, and ethical advisor. Likewise, Chaplain LeRoy Ness in Vietnam resisted pressure from his battalion, brigade, and division commanders and stuck to ethical principles of respect and personal courage as well as to his faith by quietly offering public prayers of commendation for the enemy dead whose bodies were in the care and custody of U.S. forces. For Chaplain Ness, honoring the humanity of the enemy dead through respect was a moral and religious imperative.¹² Respect for the humanity of our enemies expresses both American and professional military values, and the Chaplain Corps upholds that respect.

The Army's Chaplain Center and School teaches Just War principles—using the same text Challans mentioned, *Just and Unjust Wars* by Michael Walzer. The respect for others embedded in the Just War tradition incorporates a centuries-long relationship to religious tradition. Although Just War tradition developed over centuries, religion was the

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main vehicle for its development and continues to inform formal theory and the moral philosophy of war. As the tradition is taught in the chaplain school, its historic roots and wider moral values are central to applying both ethics and the law of land warfare.

Religion's Influence on Behavior

Challans' article suggests that religion, in general, is corrosive to moral behavior, that cruelty is historically consistent with "the religions of the world." It associates extremist religious dogma with bad effects on society, declaring that "one need look no further than Al-Qaeda."¹³ Of course we must look further than Al-Qaeda. Religious leaders have long influenced culture and society in the public square. At its worst, as in the case of Al-Qaeda, religion mixed with brutal force brings suffering.

However, in the balance, throughout history—world, national, and military—religious leaders have been "in the middle" of the most difficult



Chaplain Gerecke in his "chapel" at Nuremberg. The chair farthest right was always occupied by Hermann Goering, next to him sat Joachim von Ribbentrop, 1946. (H.H. Gerecke)



From left: Chaplain (CPT) Paul Lembke; Chaplain (CPT) John Magolee; Chaplain (CPT) LeRoy Ness; and Chaplain (CPT) Conrad N. Walker, at Fort Campbell, KY, November 1963. (U.S. Army photo, Courtesy of ELCA Archives)

moral and spiritual dilemmas in life. At their best, religious leaders convey vision including hope, solace, peace, and the alleviation of suffering by fostering moral strength and ethical behavior in the societies of the world. The Just War tradition itself and the call by religious leaders to pursue justice with humility are examples of contributions toward the good that religion brings to the world.

Though Challans complains that chaplains ought only to provide religious services, there is ample evidence that the vision and voices of chaplains in military service have helped foster moral strength and ethical clarity in decision-making. In contrast to the extreme example of Al-Qaeda cited in the article, one would do well to also remember Chaplains Gerecke and Ness and others like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Mother Theresa, and Desmond Tutu who had immense moral influence beyond simply leading religious services. Their activities were animated largely by their particular religious convictions, but in their diverse beliefs, they also were committed to righteous conduct and compassion for their fellow human beings. Chaplains “in the middle” of our

forces strive to serve the Soldiers for whose spiritual stewardship they have responsibility, and they daily aspire to emulate such exemplars. **MR**

Views expressed here are solely the author's.

NOTES

1. Madeleine Albright, *The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God, and World Affairs* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 42.
2. George C. Marshall, “Morale in Modern War,” an address at Trinity College, Hartford, CT, 15 June 1941.
3. Tim Challans, “Leading Our Leaders,” *Military Review*, September–October 2009, 123.
4. Challans.
5. Forest C. Pogue, *George C. Marshall: Organizer of Victory, Vol. III* (New York: Viking Press, 1999), 99.
6. Israel Drazin and Cecil B. Currey, *For God and Country: The History of a Constitutional Challenge to the Army Chaplaincy* (Hoboken, NJ: KATV Publishing House, 1995), 198.
7. Challans.
8. *Ibid.*
9. U.S. Army Field Manual 6-22, *Army Leadership* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, October 2006). See especially discussion in “Foundations for Army Leadership” as well as discussion about protecting free exercise and avoiding undue influence regarding religion in paragraph 4-60.
10. Challans.
11. See <<http://www.stjohnchester.com/Gerecke/Gerecke.html>>. This site has audio recordings of Chaplain Gerecke's experiences and ministry among the Nazi officials while they were on trial.
12. Personal interview conducted with Chaplain Leroy Ness by Chaplain (COL, Retired) Gordon Schweitzer in *Handbook for Chaplain Ministry in the 1990s*, March 1985, unpublished.
13. Challans.

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