

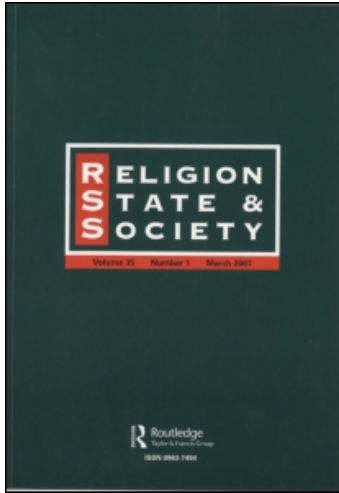
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Religion, State and Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713444726>

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Online publication date: 11 March 2011

To cite this Article Gutkowski, Stacey and Wilkes, George(2011) 'Changing Chaplaincy: a Contribution to Debate over the Roles of US and British Military Chaplains in Afghanistan', Religion, State and Society, 39: 1, 111 – 124

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/09637494.2011.546508

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2011.546508>

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Changing Chaplaincy: a Contribution to Debate over the Roles of US and British Military Chaplains in Afghanistan

STACEY GUTKOWSKI & GEORGE WILKES

ABSTRACT

This article addresses the challenges presented to NATO military chaplains in conflicts waged in majority-Muslim countries, focusing on the British and US experience in Afghanistan. Though the two militaries have quite different formal guidelines for chaplains about relations with local populations, it is argued here that the challenges for chaplains relating with local religious actors are in many respects similar. Recent changes to chaplaincy guidelines in Afghanistan have reflected a recognition of their potential to act as interpreters for soldiers facing a religious 'frontier' with which they are ill-equipped to grapple. However, chaplain engagement with locals on a religious basis is not uncontroversial. With this in mind, this article focuses on the symbolic status of the military chaplain, both within the military and in encounters with locals. Though the symbolism of a Christian chaplain in this context is not unproblematic, it is argued that ultimately chaplains could contribute to the navigation of differences and commonalities between soldiers and civilians. However, at present military chaplains are inadequately trained to deal with the religious Muslim populations they encounter in Afghanistan, Iraq or elsewhere. The contribution closes with conclusions about likely developments in the roles and training of chaplains deployed in Muslim-majority countries in the future.

Introduction

The fact that military chaplains are now increasingly faced with demands beyond their traditional roles of providing troops with faith support and pastoral and ethical guidance, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan, gave rise to a recent issue of *The Review of Faith and International Affairs*. Contributors raised a number of issues about how chaplains might respond to new challenges posed by serving during the recent conflicts and gave particular attention to expanding the role of chaplains in facilitating engagement with local populations. A religious liaison role for chaplains involved in stability operations is already well-developed in the Canadian, South African, Australian and Norwegian militaries (see Lee *et al.*, 2004; Adams, 2006, p. 13). It was also formally established within US military doctrine as of November 2009 (USJCS, 2009). In addition to liaising with the local population, the chaplain in the US scenario is also tasked with acting 'as the principal adviser to the commander on religious affairs ... [as] a member of the commander's personal staff' (USJCS,

2009, p. x). Though a similar, informal role for the chaplain, as both adviser on local religious affairs and liaison, has both historical and recent precedent, for both US and British chaplains, this expanded role is by no means without its challenges and controversy. This is particularly true in recent conflicts where, by and large, Christian chaplains have been deployed to Muslim-majority countries.

This article first engages with the ongoing discussion in the literature about this formal, expanded advisory and liaison role for military chaplains and the historical precedents for similar informal action by chaplains. It briefly explores the US model as an example of formalised role expansion. Much of the recent literature speaks to the implications for chaplains of formalisation, how they might respond to this ‘new’ role spiritually and practically. This literature also addresses benefits in terms of force protection, mission accomplishment and long-term stability through peace-building among local groups. As the literature in English has focused on the US case, this article also examines the British example and explores what such roles have meant and might mean for the British military chaplaincies.

One angle that has not received full consideration in the literature on liaison and advisory roles for chaplains is the symbolic status of military chaplains. The article then turns to this matter. Though chaplains have long had symbolic status, the nature of this status is contested. Some see it as primarily constituted through their positions as noncombatants, and many therefore argue, including chaplains themselves, that they have symbolised neutrality, providing a metaphorical ‘place apart’ from the fighting (Butt, 2010). Others have argued that the fact that chaplains are under government contract and embedded with fighting forces means, by definition, that they either are or are at least *seen to be* instruments of the state (McLaughlin, 2002, p. 5). The formalisation and expansion of a liaison and/or advisory role would seem to make this tension even more salient and one to be carefully negotiated when working with local populations, local religious leaders, nongovernmental organisations, intergovernmental organisations and private voluntary organisations.

As members of the military, chaplains have always been embedded within global structures that make their position symbolically significant in international politics. As such the figure of the chaplain can be ‘projected’ beyond the actions of any particular chaplain, and beyond that chaplain’s own honest struggle to remain and be seen as neutral. Additionally, chaplains are, in Bourdieu’s terms, ‘frontier’ figures, acting at the boundary between different groups.¹ Beyond their role in providing leadership in matters of faith moral values and pastoral support within the military, as frontier figures they are also subject to use by the state in its dealings with the local population, both practically (in negotiating with clerics or showing that the army is moral) and symbolically (in attempting to demonstrate that the state is moral, its citizens are moral, and that the war is not with, for example, Afghan citizens). While some chaplains might be uncomfortable with being tasked with such a role by the state, others might embrace it as beneficial to troops and to the local population. What are the challenges and opportunities provided by this frontier status?

The article then turns to the practical, political, ethical and religious challenges and opportunities which may be presented by a more formalised advisory/liaison role for Britain’s ‘frontier’ military chaplains. No role expansion of this kind has yet been planned by the British military, and there are strong ethical and strategic arguments both for and against adopting such a strategy.

Two recent events raise the question of potential change for chaplains. There have, firstly, been recent indications that the British military is seeking to expand its ‘cultural capability’, in particular through the establishment of a Defence Cultural

Specialist Unit (MOD, 2010). Unlike the Human Terrain Teams of social scientists deployed by the US military, the new defence cultural specialists will be soldiers themselves. Though those being trained currently are not chaplains, what are the arguments for and against training chaplains in this role? Second, in a recent meeting in London between the chief of the General Staff David Richards and the Helmand *ulema*, organised at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and prompted by the Muslim chaplain for the British Army, senior clerics urged that British imams be deployed to Afghanistan in a ‘hearts and minds’ role to highlight the importance of Islam in British society, to counter Taliban claims that British Muslims are oppressed and to explain Islam to British soldiers.² This raises the question of whether chaplains are the correct figures to be associated with ‘hearts and minds’ work: is their role not primarily the spiritual and pastoral support of soldiers? In light of the literature on a religious liaison/advisory role, we ask what would be the arguments for and against British chaplains playing a more significant ‘hearts and minds’ role in Afghanistan and, if they are so deployed, what could be learned from existing models, primarily the recent formalisation in US doctrine.

We will argue that there may be some value to be gained from exploiting the ‘frontier’ status of the British chaplain in Afghanistan, and suggest that a formal engagement between selected chaplains and the military’s ‘cultural specialists’ and civilian officials and advisers may be of mutual benefit. Because chaplains have a unique symbolic status when deployed among a population in which British forces are seen as religiously ‘other’, they can play a vital role in breaking down stereotypes and misconceptions. We argue that chaplains should be better prepared for the encounters they will have with locals on the ground and in communication with other members of their military detachments. That this can be done without compromising the chaplain’s independence and neutrality.

Chaplains as Liaisons

That chaplains have gone above and beyond their ministerial duties is not a new phenomenon. Current discussions of a religious liaison role for chaplains cite numerous historical anecdotes of informal, *ad hoc* charitable work with local populations in wartime which might in today’s jargon be seen as part of a ‘hearts and minds’ campaign (McLaughlin, 2002). These acts have included distributing relief aid, working with refugees and orphans, registering and tending to dead civilians, encouraging reconstruction work and organising recreational events to lift the spirits of the local population (see McLaughlin, 2002, pp. 12–16; Lee *et al.*, 2004, pp. 16–18).

The argument in favour of formalising this kind of work is that chaplains can and do play a significant role in bringing humanitarian relief to the local population, in showing the local population that troops and civilians back at home are moral and are respectful of their religious traditions, and, as part of a ministry of reconciliation, building peace between troops and the population and among different groups within the local population (see Volf, 2009; Moore, 2008). Drawing on the experience of 14 chaplains who had served in Iraq and Afghanistan, Adams has noted that both dialogue (for example, the setting up of regular monthly meetings by one chaplain between local clerics and chaplains) and actions (for example, one chaplain’s digging of graves for civilians killed by coalition forces) improved relations between troops and the Iraqi and Afghan populations. Moreover, collaboration to renovate 26 mosques between one US Christian chaplain and Afghan village elders and imams ‘contributed directly toward discrediting Taliban and al Qaeda propaganda’

(Adams, 2006, p. 9). Local clerics also provided important information as to how the multinational forces would better endear themselves to the local population. For example, mullahs suggested that the coalition build several madrassahs in addition to secular public schools, as locals feared that by building secular schools the coalition was indicating that it did not respect or understand their religion (Adams, 2006, pp. 16–17).

In addition to the argument that ‘they are already doing it and have had some success’, other arguments have been put forth in favour of an expanded and formalised religious liaison role for chaplains. One is that their status as noncombatants (signified by the clerical badges on their uniforms) allows them to move more freely among the population, making them particularly well-suited for relationship-building with local people. This is particularly pertinent in Afghanistan where US force protection concerns have prevented soldiers from doing this (McFate, n.d). Some chaplains have noted that their liaison work with local populations has led to a decrease in anti-coalition action in particular areas (Wismer, 2003; Stutz, 2005).

However, such work has its cons as well as its pros. First, it is not entirely clear, ethically or practically, that a chaplain should take on this additional role and, if he or she does, what the balance should be between the primary role of the chaplain in attending to the spiritual, pastoral and psychological needs of the troops and liaison work. These questions are particularly salient in light of resource considerations. For example, US chaplaincy resources have been spread so thinly in the post-Operation Desert Storm era that it is no longer possible to have one chaplain per Civil Affairs Unit (USDA, 2003). This is concerning as the particular uncertainties encountered by troops based on the types of wars they are fighting – in particular the sudden tragedies caused by improvised explosive devices (IEDs) – make this counselling and pastoral role especially important in these recent conflicts.³ Second, interaction between chaplains and local religious leaders may put both groups at such risk of retaliation by the Taliban that the gains to be made may not outweigh the dangers. Third, there are limits to the impact a chaplain can have over the long term. Chaplains’ deployment is brief, they do not live among the local population, and they may not speak the language.⁴ In an intractable conflict, there is likely to be little that a chaplain can do to negotiate a standing settlement (Adams, 2006, pp. 24–25).

Militaries are, by nature, instrumental and there is a chance that chaplains, and religion more broadly, might be used instrumentally to achieve certain military or political objectives (Otis, 2009). In advancing an expanded role for chaplains, John Carlson has consequently sought to take account of the critical observation that the military’s interest in religion may perpetuate the myth that religion has unique propensity towards violence. This use of religion, to borrow Carlson’s phrasing, ‘does not necessarily invite a consideration of why religion is of any particular or unique importance in itself’ (Carlson, 2009). This is not a theoretical argument. The instrumentalisation of religion for security purposes has had tragic consequences in the recent conflict, for example in relation to the use by US soldiers of Islamic symbols to torture prisoners at Abu Ghraib.⁵

The risk of negative repercussions following the instrumentalisation of religion by the military is real. Some have argued that there are great strategic security benefits to chaplains liaising with local religious leaders and the population in terms of force protection, mission accomplishment and intelligence collection (Lee, Burke and Crayne, p. 37). There are some reports of civilians approaching chaplains with intelligence that prevented attacks against troops and the local population (Adams, 2006, p. 16). However, the instrumental use of chaplains to collect intelligence on the

local population may pose a significant ethical dilemma for chaplains, not least since military action on that intelligence may lead to loss of life.

Chaplains as Advisers

One role that particularly raises questions about what may or may not constitute inappropriate or unethical instrumentalisation is that of providing advice to commanders. Historically, individual US chaplains have given advice to commanders on religion during the Civil War, the Philippine insurgency, the occupation of Haiti, the First and Second World Wars and Vietnam (Otis, 2009). Anecdotal evidence also indicates that such a role has been performed informally by US and British chaplains in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Many of the policy recommendations in the literature about the US military have advocated formalisation of the role already being played by chaplains outside their traditional remit. In November 2009 the newest version of *Religious Affairs in Joint Operations* (USJCS, 2009) formally established within US military doctrine that chaplains will have a dual 'religious affairs' role: to minister to troops through the facilitation of religious worship, the provision of pastoral counselling, training and education ('religious support') and an additional role in advising commanders ('religious advisement'). While religious support is a longstanding role for US chaplains, the latter is a new step, formalising the *ad hoc* liaison work already being done by chaplains in the field, expanding advisory work, and putting both on a doctrinal basis. Within the context of the religious advisement role, chaplains may also liaise with local religious leaders at the behest of the commanders, and the doctrine provides parameters for that. It notes that such action is authorised where a chaplain 'meets with a leader on matters of religion to ameliorate suffering and to promote peace and the benevolent expression of religion. It is a focused and narrow role that addresses religion in human activity without employing religion to achieve a military advantage' (USJCS, 2009, ch. III, p. 5).

In the arena of civil affairs, chaplains have now formally been assigned the task of establishing relationships with local religious leaders, building partnerships and assisting with other military chaplaincies, and building relationships with other government agencies, nongovernmental organisations and intergovernmental organisations (USJCS, 2009, p. xiv). However the emphasis of the role is placed on advising. While overall responsibility for religious affairs rests with the commander, the chaplain will operate 'as the principal adviser to the commander on religious affairs . . . [as] a member of the commander's personal staff' (USJCS, 2009, p. x). In the context of this advisory role, chaplains will have important strategic, operational and tactical level roles. They have been charged with 'preparing appropriate portions of theater plans, orders, and directives; and developing and recommending strategic command policy regarding religious issues', 'developing and recommending operational command policy regarding religious issues' and providing 'tactical level religious support' (USJCS, 2009, pp. x–xiii).

Unlike the US chaplains, British chaplains do not currently have a formal liaison or advisory role, though chaplains have informally engaged with the local population in Afghanistan. Additionally, anecdotally, British (Christian) padres have been asked to advise their commanders on local religious matters in Iraq, and this is likely to be fairly common in Afghanistan as well, where similar conditions apply.⁶ Again anecdotally, a significant concern cited by British chaplains about taking on formal 'hearts and minds' duties is that there are as it is insufficient numbers of chaplains to

provide even a basic ministry to soldiers, which will continue to be a problem in light of an ever-constricting military budget (Butt, 2010). By way of comparison, as of February 2009 there were 12 British chaplains serving in Helmand, ten more than the British brought to Afghanistan in 1880 during the Second Anglo-Afghan War, when troops were far more concentrated and the pastoral role of chaplains was far more constrained (MOD, 2009a; Ewing, 2010).

There are many anecdotal instances reported in which cultural and linguistic knowledge has served to build good relations with religious leaders and local populations. For example, a British civilian official familiar with the writing style used to address a cleric of the stature of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani was able to reword a diplomatic letter that was accepted by al-Sistani at a time when the British were seeking to build bridges with him. Adams cites numerous examples of gestures by chaplains, including one US chaplain who hosted 18 *iftar* dinners during Ramadan for Iraqis and the 101st Airborne Division (Adams, 2006, p. 35). Nevertheless, the role of the chaplain as an adviser to the commander does raise ethical, spiritual and practical questions. Ethically, how might chaplains negotiate their duties to their state, countrymen and colleagues, their role as noncombatants, and their ethical obligations to the local population if an advisory role entails that they provide operational advice? How might chaplains negotiate their role advising their commanders in a war – such as Iraq – that has been condemned as unethical by their sending churches (see for example USCCB, 2002)? Spiritually, how might chaplains best preserve the space for spirituality within and between soldiers and the local population to grow and bear fruit for peace if they must keep an eye to mission accomplishment? Practically, are chaplains as well placed as others doing cultural advisory work, either social scientists (in the case of US Human Terrain teams) or trained members of the military (in the case of UK cultural specialists), so that cultural understanding goes beyond what John Carlson has called cultural etiquette, governing questions such as how to search women in a Muslim culture (MOD, 2009b; Carlson, 2009)? Though some have argued that chaplains have natural expertise and inclinations in this area as they are familiar with religion and local leaders may feel more comfortable with them, it is by no means clear that the expertise chaplains have in their own religious milieu would naturally translate into locally relevant knowledge (Volf, 2009).⁷

Christian Chaplains, Muslim Populations: the Symbolic Status of Chaplains

Framing all these considerations is a significant contextual challenge: though Iraq and Afghanistan are Muslim-majority countries, by and large western chaplaincies are majority Christian. Though the sole British army imam has paid brief visits to Afghanistan, it is unclear whether other NATO countries have sent imams. Though some western militaries do have imams, those resources are often limited and therefore focused on ministering to the religious needs of Muslim soldiers. In an international political context in which religious identity and difference have come to play a more significant political, social and ethical part, what is the symbolic value of chaplains in this context and what are the political opportunities and challenges?

That the chaplain may be a symbolic figure is not a new phenomenon. In the literature written since at least the Second World War, the position of the chaplain as a noncombatant and symbolically moral figure has received a great deal of attention. Particularly in the literature on chaplains during the Second World War, the chaplain has been depicted as serving his troops faithfully and providing charitable aid to a beleaguered population (see Johnstone and Hagerty, 1996). Accounts of perceived

ethical failings of chaplains – such as that of the chaplain at My Lai – have received some, though less, attention.⁸

Some have argued that the chaplain's role as a religious figure plays well in a Muslim environment in which clerics are highly regarded, regardless of the religious affiliation of that chaplain (Adams, 2006, p. 38). This may be true; however, the role of Christian actors in the Muslim world has historical resonance, the echoes of empire. To build on John Carlson's argument, the deployment of chaplains by the state in an expanded role could conceivably become, or could be seen to be, part of a political strategy, utilised by more powerful western states against weaker Muslim ones, eliding the political and economic concerns of not only clerics but of their people, and directing clerics into 'religious' councils at the expense of their integration into national, regional and local political structures as well. The separation of the 'religious' from the 'political' sphere is an old colonial, Orientalist technique, based on construction of the Other as irrational, driven by communal impulse, brutally violent and opposed to human rights. The recent murder of western aid workers accused of proselytisation by the Taliban indicates that the presence of Christians in the Muslim world can be manipulated. It is also not clear that the potential difficulties are confined to Christian chaplains; though a British Hindu chaplain paid a brief, successful visit to Afghanistan, it is not known whether, for example, a Jewish chaplain might experience difficulties, if he or she were constructed by the Taliban as working for Israel.⁹ McLaughlin has pointed out that, as a member of the military, 'nothing the chaplain endeavours to do will ever be perceived as disconnected from certain political considerations' (McLaughlin, 2002, p. 5). Chaplains may find themselves on the fault-line of conflicts considered by some on both sides to be 'political' and 'religious'.

British Imams to Afghanistan?

Internal British military discussions of the possibility that the UK, at the reported request of local *ulema* from Helmand province, will send British imams to Afghanistan, reflects some awareness of this potential problem (see Sengupta, 2010). There is currently only one imam for the British Army. He, like the other non-Christian chaplains – Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh and Jewish – is not a commissioned officer, though he has visited troops in Afghanistan. It is unknown as yet whether additional imams, if they were to be sent to Afghanistan, would be permanent members of the military chaplaincy or whether they would be seconded for this task. It is also unclear whether their role would be to minister to soldiers, or additionally to be visibly and symbolically present as western Muslims in Afghanistan, or finally whether they might also have some sort of liaison or advisory role. The first of these roles has some precedent in the British military. During the Second World War *bahuns*, or Buddhist religious advisers without rank or uniform, travelled with Gurkha regiments serving in the Pacific (see Obituary, 2000).¹⁰ The latter role would be unprecedented, though the deployment of British Muslim community leaders – imams and non-imams – to Muslim-majority countries was one of the British government's main public diplomacy strategies in the aftermath of 11 September.

The long-term deployment of military imams to Afghanistan to do 'hearts and minds' work would be uncharted territory. Whether imams might be more warmly welcomed than Christian chaplains or whether they might be regarded with suspicion is unclear. Whether the British military actually has the resources to even add more imams to the payroll is also unclear, particularly in light of recent cuts to military spending, but it does raise a series of new questions about what the military chaplaincy

role symbolises. The notion of sending imams to Afghanistan and of expanding the role of mainly Christian chaplains as liaisons and/or advisers in Islamic theatres raises further questions – interesting questions – about the nature of chaplaincy.

The Political Impact of Expanding the Mission of the Chaplaincy on the Afghan Front Line

The use of chaplains in attempts to pacify localities across Afghanistan partly reflects the presumed symbolic capital of the chaplain. Chaplains are judged to have symbolic value because they are, in Bourdieu's terms, frontier figures, neither clearly within nor clearly outside groups in conflict. In practical terms, this means that, within the military hierarchy, there is a weighty body of decision-makers who deem chaplains to be particularly appropriate figures to work within the local religious environment, both because they are identified as figures who can definitively exhibit the religious face of the NATO forces to locals, and because their own religious vocation enables them to intuit the religious responses of their interlocutors.

This symbolic capital cannot be taken for granted. The relationship between military chaplains and religious figures in Afghanistan is politically sensitive on two fronts – internal and external. The literature on the subject has thus far identified the value of chaplains taking on this frontier role while skating over the potential for controversy that this role presents.¹¹

Much of the interaction between NATO military chaplains and the local population is not conceived as political. Chaplains on their own initiative – and with backing from local commanding officers – have met with local people, distributed articles for use in worship and in Quranic study, and taken part in discussions with local mullahs, both as individuals and in group settings. The British chaplains interviewed in Afghanistan for the television documentary 'Commando Chaplains' appeared to conceive of this as a straightforward extension of their role as clergymen, possibly through a display of humility and simple humanity also helping, in the broadest possible sense, to 'make peace'. None of these activities would take place without the approval of local commanding officers, who may, of course, approve these activities on the basis of a purely humanitarian impulse or of their personal religious inclinations. If the chaplain's efforts result in 'force protection', according to the US doctrine developed for chaplains working in religious support, then that is no breach of their neutrality nor of their fundamental status as noncombatants (USJCS, 2009).

On the other hand, the choice of chaplains as representatives reflects calculations about the symbolic role of chaplains acting at a religious frontier which are not easy to separate from the politics of that frontier. In the context of a 'pacification' or 'stabilisation' campaign, the need for a neutral or morally positive figure is redolent of an awareness that many locals do not identify foreign soldiers as their ethical counterparts, motivated to act (as a succession of recent British defence strategy documents would have it) as a 'force for good'.

Chaplains are not chosen for 'hearts and minds' work purely because they are unarmed figures. The literature on the subject suggests that, in Afghanistan as in Iraq, chaplains are commonly deemed to have a particular authority as religious figures, sharing something of the authority of local religious leaders and scholars. For example, Adams has noted a particular instance in which a Special Forces chaplain was introduced repeatedly by his translator as a 'Christian mullah'; the Afghans thus treated him as they would a local mullah (Adams, 2006, p. 38). This assumption shapes much of the work chaplains are encouraged to engage in; it is

presumed that their authority will persuade locals of the good intentions of the international forces.

These assumptions about the response of local populations to chaplains attached to the international forces may be supported by a wealth of examples, though they have yet to be backed up by substantial research in Afghanistan or Iraq or elsewhere. What knowledge we do have of the interactions of chaplains with leaders and local populations is based on western military sources, primarily those of chaplains themselves, and could be greatly enhanced by the voices of clerics, mullahs and Iraqi and Afghani people. Locals may not perceive western clergy as politically neutral, nor, of course, will they necessarily see Christian clergy as agents of God's revelation, salvation or plan for historical redemption.

The extension of the chaplain's mission at the frontier is a natural response to the expansion of the NATO forces' role in the stabilisation of local areas in Afghanistan, a project launched in earnest in 2008. When the central thrust of the mission of the unit to which a chaplain is attached rests on developing good relations with local populations, a chaplain will not unnaturally feel the pull of this work as well: chaplains can remain guarded about those relations, though at a cost to their ability to support soldiers in their work. There is a clear aspiration among many UK chaplains to act as a moral guide to their charges in their everyday work on the front line, and yet there are many reasons why chaplains would need to be cautious about civilian relations, with religious leaders or the wider population. Some of these reasons reflect the practical need to focus on the existing roles they already occupy, or the need to be clearly seen to retain a purely moral, pastoral or politically neutral role. As was noted above, within the UK military chaplaincy there are scarce enough resources for these central tasks alone; US chaplains take on civil affairs assignments within an entirely separate unit with a separate budget, and do not face the same challenges in recruitment of chaplains currently faced in the UK.

Other explanations for the reserve of parts of the UK chaplaincy faced with this new environment reflect the challenging role of the chaplain within the forces itself, a role in which chaplains are already situated on a variety of 'frontiers'. The literature on military chaplaincy has historically made clear that they already negotiate a complex borderline, between the role of man of God and the role of ranking officer. The UK chaplain continues to play a role in strengthening the morale of officers and troops alike, and the introduction of a civilian support role might well complicate that. In NATO's increasingly secular armies, they are also interpreters of what has become an increasingly 'alien' dimension of military life: religion and its utility in understanding or coping with death. The chaplain has limited time to introduce soldiers to the basics of their own country's ethical standards and to support their religious practice, and the added role of interpreting and engaging with local religion in Afghanistan may lie beyond what chaplains feel to be their area of competence. To acknowledge that a chaplain plays a role as a frontier figure need not necessarily lead to the conclusion that chaplains are the best people to engage in a sustained and comprehensive manner with local populations on religious matters. In the British case, that liaison role is already played in some cases by officers or civilian officials, and the training of new 'cultural specialists' will strengthen this role.

The Symbolic Power of Religious Liaison Work and the Agency of the Military Chaplaincy

The argument that chaplains should help to develop positive relations with Afghan society nevertheless has supporters at all levels of the UK military. The British forces

are of course affected by some tensions over the introduction of religion, or of particular forms of religion, into army life. However, support for the involvement of religious figures in ‘hearts and minds’ work goes beyond the circles which are usually active in promoting religious life in the military. Moreover, many advocates of the influence of religion within the military do not support this expansion beyond traditional chaplaincy roles. What these divergent responses reflect is not simply a battle over religion as a force for good, but a difference of opinion in regard to the agency of the chaplain on the ground.

Those who favour new forms of chaplaincy activity on the front lines are often buoyed by the power of the symbolism of western clerics showing Afghans that the men and women of the international forces wish them well and are prepared to take great personal risks on their behalf. However, this public symbolic role may create great tension for the individual chaplain and for the military chaplaincies which support them. Such activity may be seen as overly politicising the role of the chaplain. A second group of more critical observers might argue that the symbolic status of a western chaplain in Afghanistan is not clear, and that it is better not to draw attention to this ambiguity. Yet for others the fact that chaplains constitute a unique resource for the stabilisation programme because of their religious status and understanding or sensibility, both corresponding to the fundamentally humanitarian goals associated with the NATO military presence, is sufficiently persuasive.

What constitutes the symbolic value of the chaplains’ ‘hearts and minds’ work?

On the one hand, the chaplain is taken by many to offer a symbol who ‘represents’ the values of the military and of the country on whose behalf the military fights. Within the UK and US chaplaincies, there is a strand of thought according to which the chaplain is a representative of the Kingdom of God rather than of the state, though this is less formally insisted upon than it is in other militaries: the German or Dutch, for instance. Where the symbolic function of chaplains is deemed to lie in their representation of the collectivity rather than the purely spiritual, then a polarisation of views over the utility of chaplain involvement in civilian affairs is only to be expected, between those for whom this is a core feature of the NATO mission and of the UK defence strategy and others for whom civilian affairs are a marginal feature of the work of a fighting force, even in a counterinsurgency dependent upon a successful development of civil–military cooperation. This argument is being fought out afresh over the British deployment in Afghanistan, as it was in Iraq.

On the other hand, even with these stipulations in mind, there may be some value associated with deploying British chaplains who feel comfortable in roles which coincide in some respects with the military’s ‘hearts and minds’ work, particularly where chaplains are prepared in some circumstances to exploit a different dimension of their symbolic status. Without adopting the highly formalised American model, a less formal role could nevertheless supply selected chaplains with the kind of education in Afghan cultural and religious issues provided to chaplains in the American military. Were chaplains to have a role in transmitting this learning to soldiers, their position as committed religious support workers would no doubt influence the way in which soldiers learn to understand and respect local religion and culture, and chaplains would be selected for this role on the basis that this influence is deemed helpful by other members of the teams charged with cultural sensitisation work.

A key to the success of chaplains in this endeavour would lie in appropriate training. Pauletta Otis (2009) has suggested that chaplains will need to be ‘trained and taught the specific information and requirements to be able to fulfil these expectations’. Going a step further, Chris Seiple (2009) has argued that with

appropriate training, ‘there is no group within the military better *positioned* than the chaplains to serve as inter-religious liaisons and advisers on religious issues’. Regular chaplains are in some respects better placed to increase local levels of trust in their military units than visiting imams whose background is entirely civilian – though civilian missions will have evident strengths as well. A focus on appropriate training may enable chaplains to exercise discretion in integrating civilian engagement into their own sense of their mission as religious ministers, instead of mandating fixed forms of interaction into military doctrine, which risks the negative effects of the apparent cooption of ministers into the command structure.

Conclusions

Chaplains may be in a particularly strong position to affect change in the human relationships built between the military and civilians in the areas in which they serve. The political complications within the UK military chaplaincy present major obstacles to a wholesale and formal adoption of a role for chaplains as ‘religious advisers’, in the mode now adopted within the US military. Effective engagement of chaplains in culturally sensitive relationship building may nevertheless start with the impact chaplains may have in their role as guides and teachers within their own military, and then proceed to an engagement with civilians which proceeds first and foremost from the mission of the religious minister, strictly defined and with due consideration for the chaplain’s neutrality. On the other hand, a number of factors might militate in favour of exercising some caution about expanding chaplaincy roles. What is constituted by local religion may be far from the experience of chaplains, such that brief courses in seminary or during pre-deployment sensitisation training may be insufficient. Moreover, so much depends on the personalities and enthusiasm for the role of individual chaplains that formalising the role and providing standardised training may not be the best way forward. There will be a good deal of religious-cultural sensitisation work that is best done by educators outside the deliberately personal relationships built up by the chaplaincy. Lastly, the political sensitivity of chaplaincy roles requires caution and clarity in this area, both within the military and in terms of the relationships between chaplains and the local population.

From a British soldier’s perspective, it might seem odd that chaplains could advise them on religious affairs and yet not assist their units in religious aspects of the encounters they have with the local population. The reasons for caution about the extension of chaplains’ direct involvement with the local population where they serve are compounded by the potential for tension within the military over the additional influence this will grant to religion within the value structure of the military as a whole. Supporters of the extension of the civilian engagement work of chaplains on the front line may nevertheless conceive of the symbolic value of this work not as a reflection or projection of British, Christian or western values, but rather in terms of the power of small acts of engagement with the identities of those they encounter on the front line which shatter general stereotypes about the British state and its military objectives in Afghanistan. The notion that chaplains in some senses represent their religion, their country and their military remains important, but the frame in which symbolic power is understood has shifted from how they represent their religious and national community to how they relate to locals who are not a part of that community.

The scope for abstraction about representations of the nation and its values, or of westerners, or of Christians as a whole, at home and not in the field, is replaced by a focus on stereotype-breaking activities which take place at the metaphorical frontier,

the boundary between the local population and the international forces in Afghanistan. The chaplain who goes to great lengths to understand and support Islamic life in Afghanistan, for instance, becomes a powerful symbol, whether or not the basic mission of the international forces is credited as acting as a force for good. What is at stake is chaplains' ability to change perceptions of the local interaction between soldiers and locals, not their ability to change perceptions about the basic nature of the state and society they represent. The British imam sent to Afghanistan not only reaffirms that the British may be Muslim, or at least hospitable to Muslims. He also – according to this logic – breaks with stereotypical notions of what the parties are actually fighting about *at the frontier*, in Afghanistan: not religion, but perhaps mutual ignorance and partisan interest. The chaplain – whether Christian or not – who is prepared for such work would be an important point of contact and potential partner for others within the military and in civilian institutions who are charged with building positive relationships between the two.

Notes

- 1 Bourdieu gives as an example of a 'frontier group' the 'labour aristocracy which hesitates between class struggle and class collaboration' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 476).
- 2 Ministry of Defence Freedom of Information request by the authors, 20 April 2010.
- 3 One British chaplain emphasised the importance of the counselling and pastoral support role for recent deployment because 'around 20% have never been deployed before ... it is a young army' (Butt, 2010).
- 4 Adams (2006, pp. 24, 27). Much of this may be a matter of context. Johnstone and Hagerty (1996, pp. 297–303) have noted that Catholic British chaplains' Spanish language skills as well as shared Catholicism with the Argentinians were helpful during the Falklands War.
- 5 Andrew Sullivan has written: 'So to wage a war designed to expose the evil of the Taliban's religious intolerance, we deliberately manipulated Islam into a means of abuse. In a war designed to prove that the West was not Islam's enemy, we used Islam and Muslim culture as tools to break down the psyches of prisoners suspected of terrorism' (Sullivan, 2009).
- 6 Author's interview with a senior officer in the British Army, July 2008.
- 7 On the limitations to the space for multifaith education at theological seminaries, see Gilliat-Ray (2003).
- 8 An exception is Abercrombie (1977, p. 171).
- 9 On the visit to Afghanistan, see MOD (n.d., p. 11).
- 10 The Brigade of Gurkhas in the British Army is composed of Nepalese soldiers and dates its heritage to Gurkha units in the British Indian Army prior to 1947 and, before that, units working for the East India Company. Most recently the Gurkhas have served in Iraq and Afghanistan.
- 11 See, for example, the articles on military chaplaincy in the *Review of Faith and International Affairs*, 7, 4 (Winter 2009).

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