

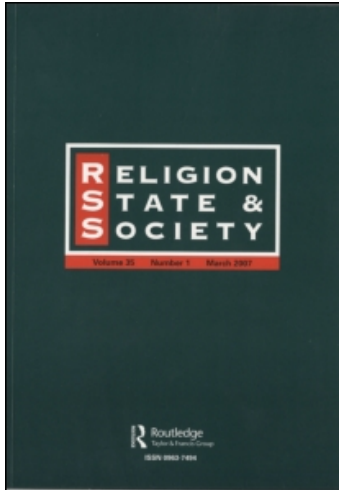
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Editorial

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Editorial

Editorial Note

I am delighted to welcome Stella Rock, senior research fellow at the Keston Center for Religion, Politics and Society at the J.M. Dawson Institute of Church–State Studies, Baylor University, Texas, as the guest editor of this special issue of *Religion, State & Society*. Her own editorial introduction follows.

November 2010

PHILIP WALTERS

The Challenges of Military Chaplaincy

Listen God . . . not even once in my life have I talked with You, but today I'd like to greet You. You know that since my childhood they've told me that You don't exist. And I, like an idiot, believed it. I never contemplated Your creation. And just tonight, from the crater made by a grenade, I looked upon the starry sky above me. I suddenly understood, admiring the universe, how cruel a falsehood can be. I don't know, God, whether You will give me Your hand, but I'll tell You, and You will understand: isn't it strange, that amid this terrible hell the light was suddenly revealed to me, and I discovered You? (Letter discovered in the pocket of a dead Soviet soldier's greatcoat during the Second World War – (Shkarovsky, 2005, pp. 26–27; my translation))

Even though they're soldiers and know killing is part of their responsibility and duty, a number of them come to me very bothered about it Our challenge is to assure them that what they are doing is morally acceptable from a Christian perspective and a patriotic one. (Major Eric Albertson, a US Roman Catholic chaplain in Iraq – (Loyd, 2004, p. 37))

The two quotes cited above neatly encapsulate the rich potential and the essential conundrum of Christian military chaplaincy. War is a crucible in which individuals find themselves confronting profound questions of transformative potential. Human beings facing death and suffering seek meaning, and chaplains – arguably – are well qualified to help them find it. To do their job properly, to reassure, support and comfort the men and women they have pastoral responsibility for, they may find themselves justifying violence in a way that (at the very least) stands in strong contrast with Jesus' reported teaching about love of enemies (see for example Matthew 5.21–26, 38–48).¹ This potential conflict is exacerbated when the methods supported by the military – aerial bombardment or weapons of mass destruction, for example – unavoidably impact

upon civilians, or in wars which cannot be supported as unambiguously just in the understanding of the chaplains' sending churches. Major Albertson is challenged to convince his soldiers that what they are doing is morally acceptable from a Christian perspective in the face of 'repeated, pondered and passionate Speeches of the Holy Father against the war in Iraq' (Sodano, 2003).

Christianity, the predominant faith tradition within western military forces, began life as a marginalised and 'ostentatiously pacifist cult' (Bachrach, 2003, p. 7). However, the change in status ushered in by Constantine's battlefield conversion – whence comes the motto of the British Royal Army Chaplains' Department, *In This Sign Conquer* – ensured that Christian clerics have been embroiled in the violent conflict of worldly kingdoms ever since. The pacifist tradition remains marginalised, while mainstream Christian practice has accommodated the demands of societies that promote power, hierarchy, armed defence of property and person, and physical victory over enemies. In doing so Christianity has achieved remarkable geographical spread, operating effectively within diverse cultures and arguably wielding a beneficial influence on their social development. The arguments for military chaplaincy reflect this compromise: a church standing outside the armed forces preaching love risks losing individual soldiers' souls, and may be unable to exert positive moral influence on military structures and policies. How, indeed whether, a ministry inside the military is able to effectively support and guide both soldiers and the military machine is one of the fundamental questions raised by this special issue. As one contributor observes, 'clearly the different priorities of these two worlds create profound challenges to retaining any integrity in either capacity' (Benham Rennick).

The articles collected here explore military chaplaincy in a variety of historical and geographical contexts, reflecting on the tensions, challenges and benefits that the role of the military chaplain engenders. The first article, by a leading authority on medieval chaplaincy, David Bachrach, identifies a tripartite system of spiritual support for secular warfare in the Carolingian and Ottonian kingdoms, in which 'the organisation of army-wide rites and the mobilisation of the "home front"' deemed necessary to secure victory was supplemented by 'the provision of pastoral care to individual fighting men'. This pastoral component of military chaplaincy, which may be perceived as spiritual nourishment, morale boosting, or a mixture of both, has remained a constant, and its continuing importance is reflected in many of the contributions in this issue.

While reference is made to chaplains of others faiths – specifically Islam and Judaism – the contributions herein reflect the fact that in Europe and North America military chaplaincy remains predominantly Christian. The composition of the armed forces and their sending societies are, however, less homogenous than they were half a century ago, and the particular challenge of working in an increasingly religiously diverse environment is addressed by Joanne Benham Rennick. Canada's military chaplaincy has historically 'been a bastion of Caucasian, male, predominantly Christian, conservatism', but sensitive to other faith perspectives, the Chaplain Branch has rejected their Constantinian motto *In Hoc Signo Vinces* as invoking 'oppressive religio-military conquests', and dropped the militaristic Branch hymn *Onward Christian Soldiers*.

Benham Rennick argues that contemporary chaplains face 'a threefold challenge in carrying out traditional religious ministry: increasing pluralism, deinstitutionalised beliefs and the loss of moral consensus'. Traditional religious authority no longer holds sway amongst modern 'consumers' who select, modify and privatise their religious faith, and traditional conservative values (promoting a heterosexual,

patriarchal Christian lifestyle) are no longer the benchmark of right and wrong. In response to these challenges, chaplains have developed a 'ministry of presence', which implies participating in and being vulnerable to the world of the soldier, and – when needs be – suffering alongside them.

Suffering alongside the soldiers, or failure to do so, is a theme which emerges in writings about chaplaincy in many eras, perhaps most forcefully in those that scrutinise the bloodbath of the 'Great War'. In this issue Oliver Rafferty explores the way in which the sacramental system shaped Catholic chaplaincy in the First World War. The Protestant stress on an unmediated relationship with God meant that physical proximity to men facing death was unnecessary for Protestant pastors – they could (and some did) choose to be at the front once the initial prohibition was lifted, but they were not obligated by their theology to be there. A Catholic priest could not reasonably be anywhere else – when Catholics are in mortal danger, they must have access to the sacraments (confession, extreme unction, communion) which allow them to die in a state of grace and which can be administered only by a priest. As Bachrach shows, the shift from the early Christian practice of once in a lifetime confession to a repeatable sacrament (which soldiers could access and then continue in a service which necessitated sin) fundamentally changed the nature of military chaplaincy. To facilitate the repeatable confession which offered soldiers 'an opportunity to express their fears, including their fears of damnation for sinful acts, and then to be offered salvation through penance', Carolingian legislation required every unit commander to recruit a priest capable of ministering to the soldiers in his care, which resulted in a 'dramatic increase in the number of clerics who participated in military campaigns' (Bachrach, this issue). Catholics during the First World War longed no less than their medieval predecessors for a priest to hear their confessions, offer absolution and administer the *viaticum* (the body and blood of Christ given before death). Rafferty's contribution reminds us that while Pope Benedict XV was repelled by a war in which his priests supported soldiers on opposing sides and would not admit chaplains to the Vatican in military uniform, the Catholic Church was obliged to respond to the sacramental needs of its fighting flock. In the UK this meant facilitating the significant deployment of Catholic priests in an army which was wary, if not downright suspicious, of both the Papacy and Catholics.

Whilst the status of chaplains within the military structures of European and North American nations was secured by the worldwide conflagrations of the twentieth century, military chaplaincy was also discredited by the fact that chaplains on all sides had contributed to legitimising mass slaughter. The moral challenges are perhaps clearest in the case of those Christian chaplains who ministered within the Nazi military machine which, while opposing them in principle, recognised their use in raising morale. Doris Bergen, editor of one of the seminal works on military chaplaincy (2004), has shown how German chaplains had to work hard to legitimise themselves in the eyes of the men and officers, cultivating a soldierly appearance and stressing their own masculinity and military credentials. In making themselves clearly part of that military, they effectively legitimised Nazi military actions. Indeed, just by being there, even at mass killing sites, they 'offered Germany's warriors the comforting illusion that despite the blood on their hands, they remained decent people, linked to a venerable religious tradition' (Bergen, 2001a, p. 234). There were, of course, a few who did oppose or attempt to minimise atrocities and clergy who chose to work subversively in unofficial positions, but the vast majority of chaplains – selected with the approval of the military and insecure about their position – contributed to the 'spiritual numbing' of the Third Reich (Bergen, 2001b, p. 134).

The subsequent trauma of those Christians who participated in Nazi military action is unsurprising – take the Catholic described by his chaplain as ‘ruined’ by the experience of participating in the mass slaughter of Jews. He had fired over their heads, but needed to know from his chaplain whether he should have risked death and openly refused to take up his gun (Bergen, 2001a, p. 247). What about those who have blood on their hands as a result of fighting on the ‘right side’? Research indicates that substantial damage is done to most individuals forced to overcome their innate reluctance to kill another human being (Grossman, 1996; see also Jones, 2006). The tendency of ordinary soldiers, epitomised by the First World War veteran Harry Patch (Tommy, 2009), is to opt not to shoot to kill, or simply not to shoot at all in battle: in wars up to and including the Second World War non-firing rates are estimated at around 80 per cent.² This led to the development of a system of conditioning to kill that one lieutenant colonel has described as ‘psychological warfare’ conducted on one’s own troops, and which is ‘common practice in most of the world’s best armies’ (Grossman, 1996, pp. 251, 255). Killing on order may now be automatic for well-trained soldiers, but it remains ‘a significant predictor of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms and alcohol abuse, even after controlling for combat exposure, suggesting that taking a life in combat is a potent ingredient in the development of mental health difficulties’ (Maguen, 2010, p. 89). This offers a serious challenge to the institution of military chaplaincy, and not only in terms of addressing spiritual needs in treating PTSD, the importance of which has been raised by research which concludes that ‘veterans’ experiences of killing others and failing to prevent death weakened their religious faith, both directly and as mediated by feelings of guilt’ (Fontana and Rosenheck, 2004, p. 579; see also Carlson, 2009). The chaplaincy is in the incongruous position of supporting an organisation that trains people to overcome their natural revulsion to killing.

Cold War-era studies, conducted with military chaplains in 1950s North America and 1960s Britain, suggested that chaplains tended to avoid issues which might highlight the conflict between their roles as Christian minister and uniformed officer, and that soldiers were more likely than the chaplains to be concerned over the morality of carrying out orders to kill (Burchard, 1953; Zahn, 1969). Chaplains serving in Vietnam also ‘seemed unwilling to respond or incapable of responding meaningfully to the queries their men posed. Some seemed immune to doubts about warfare and killing’ (Loveland, 2004, p. 237). Times have changed, however, for chaplains and armies. In the UK the Cardiff Centre for Chaplaincy Studies is engaged in examining military chaplains’ perspectives on the ethics of conflict, and promotes critical reflection about military culture and aims (Todd, 2009). Militarism is – for the most part – out of fashion, and one review of military chaplains which focuses on the Royal Dutch Army argues that ‘modern Western Armed Forces do not directly aim at killing people, but look upon this, on the contrary, as an “indirect effect” of knocking the opponent out of action’ (van Iersel, 1996, p. 13). Western forces have also been (at least in the 1990s) increasingly engaged in peacekeeping missions rather than aggressive (or even defensive) action and their role has been perceived as a peacemaking one (Volf, 2009; Dörfler-Dierken, this issue). Nevertheless, van Iersel stresses that ‘the professional exertion of violence should ... remain an object for ethical contemplation’ and believers within the Armed Forces ‘will, therefore, ask themselves over and over again what exactly are the significance and the extent of the prohibition to kill’ (van Iersel, 1996, p. 13).

While there has been a gradual move to include the ethical scrutiny of military action within military chaplaincy’s mission, in addition to the traditional tasks of

administering sacraments and preparing soldiers inwardly for battle, few chaplaincies have substantially revised their structures to facilitate this emerging role. One that has is explored in this issue by Angelika Dörfler-Dierken, in an article tracing the inspirational development of postwar German military chaplaincy. Focusing on Lutheran chaplaincy, she argues that the German Protestant Church expects chaplains to be the moral conscience of the army. To facilitate this role, and to ensure that the chaplains' own consciences are never again blunted by their environment, the chaplaincy is designed to prevent clergy from becoming too closely integrated into the military. Chaplains are structurally outside the chain of command and have no military rank; their terms of service are restricted to between 6 and 12 years. Their role is to sharpen the consciences of individual soldiers, and 'to ask time and again whether the military operations in which the *Bundeswehr* participates are actually conducive to peace ... or whether they add to the spiral of violence'. This structural separation is not total, however. The Christian churches are still privileged by law in Germany, and the military's exclusively Christian chaplains are obliged to deliver compulsory ethical training to all soldiers irrespective of their professed faith (or atheism). Dörfler-Dierken also sounds a note of warning: the challenge will be to maintain a prophetic ministry (shaped in armed forces which were created for defensive engagements only, and which did not engage in combat operations until 1995) now that German chaplains are once again supporting soldiers engaged in battlefield action. Promoting the civilian churches' peace ethic necessarily leads to conflict with secular politicians and military leaders, as former Bishop Margot Käßmann's criticism of operations in Afghanistan demonstrates (Spiegel, 2010; Dörfler-Dierken, this issue). Even in conditions designed to strengthen their primary allegiance to their sending churches, military chaplains may feel conflicted when the soldiers they support are criticised by clergy 'outside'.

Chaplains in other, more structurally embedded, military chaplaincies may want to act as a conscience for the armed forces, but are they able to do so effectively? Loveland, who has traced the development of US military chaplaincy from a ministry of morale-boosting to a ministry of moral conscience, points out that in 1982 the US chief of chaplains took early retirement, recognising that expressing his reservations about Reagan's policies with regard to nuclear war and El Salvador put him in an 'untenable position' (Loveland, 2004, p. 244). At the other end of the hierarchy, an Anglican vicar who resigned as a chaplain to the New Zealand Armed Forces after only a year argues that making clerics into uniformed officers employed by the military is 'disabling' (Ramage, 2009). As Otis observes, a US chaplain is 'not "called" by a church as such; he is under contract to the U.S. government' (Otis, 2009, p. 5). Otis – like many others – sees no good reason to change this, and the question of whether such a chaplain is able to act as an effective moral conscience is not raised in her overview of US chaplaincy practice (although there are discreet references to the challenge of 'church–state controversies'). Indeed, as a subsequent letter to the editor pointed out, the entire special issue on military chaplaincy in which Otis's article appeared skirted around the question of whether a military chaplaincy can ever be effective, given that 'chaplains are useful [to the armed forces] insofar as they support the military in pursuance of its goals—fighting and winning wars and establishing the peace. Any religious message that is contrary to these goals would probably not be welcome' (Cruz-Uribe, 2010, p. 63). The more pertinent question is then, perhaps, whether the armed forces want their chaplains to act as moral consciences, beyond a brief to reassure doubting soldiers that what they are doing is morally acceptable.

This question is particularly pertinent for the British Royal Army Chaplains' Department, since, as Peter Howson demonstrates in this issue, its most senior appointment is now wholly in the control of the military. In stark contrast to the post-war German situation, British churches have allowed to slip from their grasp even those mechanisms by which they might be consulted on the most appropriate cleric to lead the spiritual ministry to the armed forces (and thereby shape the future direction of the service). Although 'the archbishop of Canterbury was the only person routinely contacted about the suitability of chaplains to be appointed as Chaplain General', now not even he can expect to have his opinion taken into consideration, and the Interdenominational Advisory Committee (created during the First World War to facilitate input by other Christian denominations and Jewish chaplains) last met in 1968 (Howson). This abdication of control comes at a time when the increasing focus on religion as a source of violence and as a potential solution to violence means that military chaplaincy has become increasingly relevant to the armed forces, and as a result faces serious ethical and logistical challenges.

Much of the current debate about military chaplaincy focuses on how religious figures might contribute to stabilising operations rather than on how they might challenge the ethics of current operations. In response to these discussions, Stacey Gutkowski and George Wilkes explore whether chaplains should be associated with 'hearts and minds' work, and the potential problems and benefits of their taking on an expanded religious liaison/advisory role. Focusing on British forces in Afghanistan, and cognisant of multiple conflicting resonances, Gutkowski and Wilkes argue that chaplains have important symbolic status, as 'frontier figures, neither clearly within nor clearly outside groups in conflict', potentially even as 'Christian mullahs' in occupied countries which are predominantly Muslim and accord respect to religious authorities. Current supporters of this expanded role for chaplains suggest that by 'small acts of engagement' chaplains have the power to 'shatter general stereotypes about the British state and its military objectives in Afghanistan'. More cautiously, Gutkowski and Wilkes argue that 'what is at stake is the 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'. Chaplains furthermore have the potential to spread cultural sensitivity amongst troops. In both instances there are training and resource implications (as well as significant ethical implications) to consider, but Gutkowski and Wilkes conclude that chaplains – Christian and, potentially, Muslim – are crucially positioned to facilitate positive relationships between local communities and the military.

If military chaplains' worth – indeed their credibility – lies in their being figures of religious authority with deep spiritual knowledge and sensitivity to other religious cultures, perhaps it is time to revisit the question of whether their supervision, or the 'command and control' system that regulates and directs their work, should also be religious.

STELLA ROCK

Notes

- 1 The same may be said for many faith traditions, but the focus in this introduction reflects the fact that all contributors to this special issue are writing predominantly about Christian chaplains.

- 2 Figures initially proposed by S.L.A. Marshall suggesting that only 15–25 per cent of soldiers shoot with intent to hit the enemy are still debated, but although his research methods have been severely criticised, his findings have been supported by many subsequent scholars (see Grossman, 1996).

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