Ethical Challenges for Commanders and Their Chaplains

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U.S. Army (Brian D. Lehnhardt)

Imam and Army chaplain talk after meal at Baghdad mosque

Since the beginnings of our respective military Services, commanders expected their chaplains to be both religious and ethical leaders. Commanders relied on chaplains to reinforce Servicemembers' spiritual strength, commitment, cohesion, morale, and moral discipline. This expectation has always been grounded in the role of professional clergy in larger society. Chaplains are clergy endorsed and sent by recognized denominations and faith groups representing the religious communities of our nation.

The idea of clergy serving as ethical leaders is expressed in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thought, as well as in most other religious traditions. Clergy, including those serving in uniform, constitute a conduit for divine law through teaching, action, and example. It is not surprising, therefore, that some of America's premier military commanders—including Generals George Washington, Andrew Jackson, Ulysses Grant, John Pershing, and George Patton—looked to chaplains to support and reinforce good conduct "for God and Country" among troops. Moreover, faith groups that send chaplains to the military expect them to admonish Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and Airmen to exemplify high ideals of personal behavior as an extension of American values at home.

Historically, chaplains exert moral leadership and influence through preaching, counseling, teaching, writing, and personal example. Since 1861, Army chaplains have also been directed by regulation to advise their commanders "on the moral and religious condition" of the troops, with "such suggestions as may conduce to the social happiness and moral improvement" of the unit. Current Army regulations specify simply that chaplains will advise the commander and the staff on matters of "religion, morals, and morale."

Until the Vietnam War, chaplains' moral leadership activities were largely focused on the individual enlisted Servicemember. Chaplains helped combat drunkenness, venereal disease, gambling, disorderly conduct, racism, sexism, and a number of other dysfunctional behaviors. After the My Lai massacre in 1968, which led to 12 officers being indicted (including 2 generals and 4 colonels), the ethical focus of the Army enlarged exponentially. Ethics courses for officers were inserted in military education from West Point to the U.S. Army War College. Instructors for these courses were originally chaplains, almost all with combat ministry experience. The Tailhook scandal of 1991–1992 resulted in the forced retirement of two rear admirals and persuaded the Navy to look again at its ethical programs. One result was the

Navy command chaplain counsels Sailor aboard USS *Monterey* while under way in Gulf of Oman

U.S. Navy (Remus Borisov)

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1995 publication of *Readings in Philosophy and Ethics for Naval Leaders*, designed for Naval Academy Midshipmen.

Current post-9/11 operations in Iraq and Afghanistan again challenge commanders and chaplains to look at ethics in a new light. Forces serve amid cultures that do not separate religion, politics, and ethical norms. Ethical advice by chaplains to commanders takes this context into account. For example, Army and Navy chaplains who meet with indigenous religious leaders may find themselves engaged in what has been called "Track Two Diplomacy." It is defined by the U.S. Institute of Peace as "unofficial, informal interaction between members of advisory groups or nations which aims to develop strategies, influence public opinion, and organize human and material resources in ways that might help resolve conflict out of public view and without the requirements to formally negotiate or bargain for advantage."

Chaplain involvement in such liaison activities is recognized in Joint Publication 1–05, *Religious Support in Joint Operations*: the "joint force chaplain, after careful consideration and only with the joint force commander's approval, may serve as a point of contact to host nation civilian and military religious leaders, institutions, and organizations, including established and emerging military chaplaincies, through the civil-military operations center." Numerous chaplains of the three Services have been engaged since 2003 in establishing prayer meetings, breakfast or lunch meetings, and formal discussions with mullahs regarding renovations of mosques, schools, museums, and other public buildings. In one case, Army Chaplain Larry Adams-Thompson conducted chaplain-mullah meetings and advised his commander about using $1 million in Commander's Emergency Response Program funds. Chaplains across Afghanistan had used these funds in school construction projects that they organized with local mullahs. John Finney, the Combined Joint Task Force–180 political advisor, said that dialogue between chaplains and imams was some of the most effective work the U.S. military has conducted with the local populace.

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Though multitrack diplomacy (Track Two and Track Nine) conducted by joint force chaplains acting under their commanders' direction has paid dividends in terms of human relationships, concerns have arisen with ethical and diplomatic implications. Some imams and mullahs do not wish to interact with American military chaplains; one reason is the risk of imams and mullahs becoming targets for terrorists. Questions also surfaced about the meaning to indigenous clerics of informal diplomacy and having military forces as the principal agents of humanitarian work in the midst of military operations in the same area.

Captain George Adams, a senior Navy chaplain, listed some considerations involved in sponsoring extended chaplain work with indigenous religious leaders and the indigenous population:

- Even the best chaplains have limited language skills and cultural understanding, especially when a village may have pluralistic religious groups competing with one another.
- Chaplains are usually not trained negotiators.
- Chaplains are typically not assigned to an area for a long period and may not be able to follow through on expectations from local populations.
- Meetings with indigenous religious leaders may present security concerns.
- U.S. military chaplains represent many diverse religious groups, some of which do not view interfaith dialogue as appropriate.
- Chaplains usually interact with leaders of local communities, not with national leaders. However, a local religious leader in Iraq and Afghanistan can have significant local influence.

If one had to summarize these considerations, perhaps they could fall into a general category of taking care lest our intentions in nationbuilding are misunderstood and expectations of indigenous leaders and their people are frustrated by factors beyond our control.

There are many other ethical considerations for commanders and chaplains engaged in bringing peace to Central and Southwest Asia. There are obvious tensions between trying to win the hearts and minds of people at one moment and directing drones against targets in their midst in the next. Yet commanders and chaplains must not yield to overwhelming complexities, but clearly understand that ethical issues in the war on terror are intertwined with diplomatic, political, and military issues as well. To date, many deployed chaplains have served their commanders and their country well in trying to build relationships for a stable peace. But the complexities of advising commanders about "religion, morals, and morale" go far beyond an ethical checklist, moving toward a multilayered spreadsheet of possible implications. **JFQ**

U.S. Air Force (Jim Varhegyi)

Navy chaplain listens as relief agency official describes situation at internal displaced persons camp outside Kabul, Afghanistan