

THE CHAPLAIN CORPS: *Moral Agency in Military Affairs*

INTRODUCTION

The American military maintains three distinct chaplain corps, one for each department. I refer to these combined as the chaplain corps in this article. The chaplain corps is composed of commissioned moral agents who are ultimately responsible, not to the commander or the politic du jour, but to their source of all truth; their God through Holy Scripture. When hearing the title “Chaplain,” most people think of prayers, counseling and religious rites. This may be true but in our armed services this concept is incomplete. The primary constitutional foundation of military chaplaincy is moral advocacy, i.e., the pursuit of what is ‘good’, and the chaplain’s primary uniformed responsibility is “to advise and assist commanders in the discharge of their responsibilities to provide for the free exercise of religion...”¹

Religion is not limited to worship and rites on a holy day. Religion is, and always has been, lived-out in the daily lives of service members and their families. Whether in garrison, on the flight line, ship or forward of the wire, the chaplain’s primary military responsibility is moral advisor.

THE ORIGIN OF MORAL AGENCY AND THE CHAPLAIN CORPS

General George Washington was the first commander-in-chief of the Continental Army. It was Washington himself who envisioned moral agency for the chaplain corps when he stated “the only victorious army (was) going to be, at least, an ethical

army if not a religious army....”² In a letter to Governor Robert Dinwiddie of Virginia, Washington wrote: “(W)e set out, and, by ‘The Protection of *Providence’, reached Augusta Court-House in seven days, without meeting the enemy; otherwise we must have fallen a sacrifice, through the indiscretion of these whooping, hallooing gentlemen soldiers!... As touching a Chaplain, if the government will grant a subsistence, we can readily get a person of merit to accept of the place, without giving the commissary any trouble on that point, as it is highly necessary we should be reformed from those crimes and enormities we are so universally accused of.”³ Washington’s intent was clear; rather than for prayers or religious rites, military chaplains were primarily acquired as subject matter experts in morality, i.e., what is good, as defined by their religious code(s) of ethics.

During our nation’s first war the Constitutional Congress established both the Army⁴ and Navy⁵ Chaplain Corps’ in 1775. Not insignificantly, Washington presided over the Constitutional Convention of 1787-1788⁶ where one third of the signers of the Constitution were also militia officers.⁷ Washington’s intent for the chaplain corps as a religious moral agency, tested in war, was adopted by our founding fathers. During the Civil War, both Christian and Jewish⁸ clergy served as chaplains whose “first duty was to advise the commander on the moral and spiritual health of the unit and then make any other suggestions for the happiness of the soldier.”⁹ Today, our contemporary

publication for Religious Affairs in Joint Operations states “As a special staff officer, the chaplain advises the commander and other staff members on moral and ethical decision-making...”¹⁰ From the American Revolution onward, the chaplain corps primary uniformed responsibility is not preaching, counseling or religious rites. These, of course are important. But the first duty of a uniformed chaplain is to advise command on what is good.

MORAL AGENCY AND THE 1ST AMENDMENT

Regarding issues of ‘Church and State,’ neither Washington nor the signers of the Constitution saw any conflict between the utilization of clergy as moral advisors and the Establishment Clause.¹¹ The Supreme Court confirmed this stating “It is clear that neither the 17 draftsmen of the Constitution who were Members of the First Congress, nor the Congress of 1789, saw any establishment problem in the employment of congressional Chaplains to offer daily prayers in the Congress, a practice that has continued for nearly two centuries. It would be difficult to identify a more striking example of the accommodation of religious belief intended by the Framers.”¹² The same justices applied this historic precedent to the military chaplain corps saying “by Acts of Congress, it has long been the practice that federal employees are released from duties on these National Holidays, while being paid from the same public revenues that provide the compensation of the Chaplains of the Senate and the House

and the military services.”¹³ Though the SCOTUS was deliberating specifically on prayer, the argument holds that the duties and responsibilities of historic chaplaincy are constitutional.

By acknowledging the constitutionality of military chaplaincy, proper interpretation must therefore distinguish between the promotion of a state religion and providing religious expertise. While in the pulpit a chaplain operates as non-government clergy, freely exercising his or her 1st Amendment rights of speech and religion. In the unit, a chaplain is a uniformed ethics officer hired for his or her religious expertise and constrained by the 1st Amendment’s Establishment Clause.

MORAL AGENCY AND THE COMMANDER

Let’s examine the role of the chaplain in the decision-making processes of two close friends and commanders, General Ulysses S. Grant and General William Tecumseh Sherman. General Grant was at best an agnostic with little appreciation for religion in his personal life, preferring to “*Leave the matter of religion to the family altar, the church, and the private school, supported entirely by private contributions. Keep the church and state forever separate.*”¹⁴ Note below that despite Grant’s preference for non-religion, he applied Washington’s intent for chaplaincy in military affairs:

“When Col. Ulysses S. Grant took command of the 21st Illinois infantry

regiment, he had a Methodist chaplain, James Crane. One day Colonel Grant ordered a Soldier to be tied to a tree and whipped for desertion. As they began to apply 50 lashes, Colonel Grant asked Chaplain Crane, ‘Chaplain, do you think this is a good sentence?’ The chaplain said, ‘I don’t think it’s my place to say anything about that.’ Colonel Grant said, ‘No, it is your place. You need to advise me about whether what we’re doing is what we should be doing ... I know what the law permits; what I want to hear from you is whether you think this is the right thing to do.’ The chaplain said, ‘I think it’s an excessive number.’ So Colonel Grant stopped at 25.”¹⁵

As a commander, Grant recognized that his personal code of ethics and the influence of his emotions may suffer from lack of perspective. Grant did not ask for Chaplain Crane’s Christian or Methodist theology—he couldn’t care less. Grant also saw no conflict in his belief of ‘separation of church and state’ and the presence of an officer trained in religion. When Grant sought advice from his chaplain, he was consulting a subject matter expert on his community’s standards for dignity and civility. Grant welcomed the advice of both his legal advisor and his moral advisor before making a decision. As a commander, Grant reserved the right and responsibility for making his decisions. In the context of respecting the moral beliefs of others, Grant was an ethical leader.

In contrast, Grant’s good friend, General

Sherman, was a self-described atheist and humanist. In giving his basis for decision making, he said “*I make up my opinions from facts and reasoning, and not to suit anybody but myself. If people don’t like my opinions, it makes little difference as I don’t solicit their opinions or votes.*”¹⁶ Sherman also gives us his personal ethics (what is good) in war, saying: “*The United States has the right and power... (to) take every life, every acre of land, every particle of property, everything that to us seems proper...*”¹⁷

On examination of Sherman’s basis for ethical decision-making, one may rightly infer that he had little regard for the ethics of religiously informed chaplains. When Sherman was approached by clergy for transportation to the front lines he said “*Certainly not; crackers and oats are more necessary to my mind than any moral or religious agency.*”¹⁸ In reflection on both Grant’s and Sherman’s statements it is clear these commanders understood the chaplain as a religious moral agent. However, unlike Washington and Grant, Sherman demonstrated that in his worldview, historical standards of morality (what is good) were subordinate to his personal opinion. The means justified the end. Sherman was an unethical leader.

MORAL AGENCY IN MILITARY OPERATIONS

Chaplains are not pastors, they are missionaries. In other words, chaplains are not *primarily* commissioned to shepherd their own religious communities but are on-

loan to the government for the advising of what is good. *My Lai*,¹⁹ *Tailhook*²⁰ and *Abu Ghraib*²¹ all have a common denominator; there were no functioning chaplains present. Specifically, there were no uniformed moral agents standing at parade rest and stating: ‘*This is not good!*’

One of the best examples of the impact of religious moral agents advising command comes from an incident at the end of WWII. *“After its surrender, with tacit approval from the U.S. occupation authorities, Japan set up a ‘comfort women’ system for American GIs. American authorities permitted the official brothel system to operate despite internal reports that women were being coerced into prostitution.”*²²

This brothel system was not illegal and the American military provided the prostitutes and service member clients with the proper doses of penicillin. In all command areas of concern the prostitution business was a success. However, *“Chaplain Art Webber, who was a Missouri Synod Lutheran, wanted nothing of that. He got together with other chaplains and went to see General Patch, and said, ‘We want you to know if this staff action comes through, we’ll all resign our commissions on the spot.’ So they shut down the houses of prostitution and got jobs for the young women so they could earn an honest living. They reduced the venereal disease rate very fast.”*²³

Following the advice of his moral agents, General Patch maintained both his mission effectiveness and the civility and dignity of the community in which he operated. General Patch’s leadership created both an effective unit and a good unit.

Chaplains are only as ‘good’ as their

religious convictions. Good chaplains understand that they are ultimately accountable to *“The Supreme Judge of the World”*²⁴. A chaplain’s opinion must never rest on: *“I make up my opinions from facts and reasoning....”*²⁵ Commanders may always consult their Execs and bartenders for that. A chaplain is an ambassador from the religious tradition from which he or she was sent and, therefore, the wisdom offered must be based on that religious tradition. In military operations there are no staff members more dangerous than chaplains who advocate for positions contrary to the teachings of their faith communities. When chaplains ‘go native,’ when they lose the ‘truth’ of their religiously informed moral center, senior leadership is disconnected from the moral sensibilities of the people and the people become disconnected from the moral sensibilities of their God. Bad things happen.

Imagine American military operations without moral sensibilities. Consider the Vietnam Mai Lai Massacre in which our soldiers *“acted with extraordinary brutality, raping and torturing villagers before killing them and dragging dozens of people, including young children and babies, into a ditch and executing them with automatic weapons.”*²⁶ Though this example illuminates an extreme form of licentiousness that may attend killing, all experienced chaplains will testify to difficult moral interventions required to maintain dignity and civility within the fog of war. General Washington was right to acquire moral agents; Grant relied on them; but Sherman did not and bad things happened.

CONCLUSION

For 239 years²⁷ our nation has intentionally commissioned religious chaplains to counter command demagoguery and operational moral anarchy. Chaplains represent the historic moral center and the understanding of dignity and civility of those who have sent them. General Washington knew that a military unit without a chaplain was a moral hazard and a liability to a successful mission. The signers of the Constitution concurred. General Grant knew how to integrate his chaplain in daily operations yet General Sherman would not, and the commanders responsible for Abu Ghraib did not.²⁸ Chaplains have sworn an oath to *“The Supreme Judge of the World”*²⁹ and are not ultimately bound to any political party or cultural ‘norm.’ In fact, military chaplains are counter-cultural by design. Chaplains have each sworn allegiance to a God that has revealed what is “good,” providing senior leadership with an objective and historic community metric on which to make informed moral decisions.

Two final questions for commanders and senior leadership: Where are your chaplains? Whose legacy would you like to share: Grant’s or Sherman’s?

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