

Military Chaplaincy in Contention: Chaplains; churches and the morality of conflict.

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Military Chaplaincy in Contention is a collected volume of papers written predominantly by chaplains who have served or continue to serve in the armed forces. It seeks to explore the moral role of their positions within the changing landscape of society, modern warfare and the military. It formatively draws on the experiences of chaplains' experiences serving in Afghanistan with some recognition towards those who have served in Iraq.

This double review is written by two friends and neighbours involved in church life in Preston – a city with strong links with the military with its army barracks and aircraft industry. One writes as a pacifist within the Anabaptist tradition, the other as an Anglican who has served in the British army in Iraq, and who was a witness at the public enquiry into the death in detention of an Iraqi civilian.

Review (1) by Greg Smith..

Let me begin this review of a book I would never have thought of reading, had I not been asked to review it by the editor of this journal, by nailing my colours to the mast. Indeed such a military / naval idiom feels out of place to a pacifist of the Anabaptist tradition, for that is broadly where I stand. However, I do have to admit that when faced with extreme situations such as the existential threat to humanity posed by Hitler I can see the logical and moral force of Bonhoeffer's theology of embracing sin in resistance to tyranny, or even of Temple's view that once you have decided to fight you need to do so without being half hearted.

The writers in this volume of essays all come from a different viewpoint, broadly within the tradition of just war theology, and almost all from that of ordained clergy who have served in recent times as chaplains with the British Army. In doing so they have made two first order moral and theological decisions; firstly that there are times when a nation state is justified in using lethal force to achieve its political ends and secondly that the church which they represent has a legitimate role in offering ministry to the agents of the state who deliver that lethal force. Furthermore by serving as military chaplains they have chosen to become embedded in the life of the forces and to bear the personal risks that follow. Although technically not under military command, they have taken on obligations by being part of the army, as specialists in ritual, ethics and pastoral care within the institution.

Various chapters in the book reflect on the role of the chaplain in sustaining the morale of the troops, the inability of chaplains to seriously challenge the ethics of operational decisions in a context where lawyers are the key advisers to commanders, or where technology such as remote controlled weaponry dominates the battlefield. For me these discussions simply clarify the issue, that once the ethical decision that lethal force is permissible has been made, all that remains is not ethics but politics, legal cover for violence which inevitably produces random damage to human beings (combatant and non-combatant alike – if one can make the distinction) and the cynical manipulation of the media in damage limitation exercises. The chaplain having accepted the Queen's shilling has forfeited the right to challenge the morality of war. There is merely a small space in which to contribute to the formation of some degree of virtue among the soldiers (s?)/he lives alongside, in the hope that in the heat of battle they will retain some level of human decency, rather than turn into Ramboesque brutes.

Some contributors (particularly James Coleman) revisit the issue of just war theory, but as far as I can see without much progress in questioning the role of the national state, in alliance with others in interfering in the local civil conflicts of smaller nations like Sierra Leone, Libya, Afghanistan and Iraq - where the underlying if unstated concern is to support the interests of global capitalism.

Coleman does at least discuss some of the legalities of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, but merely to bemoan the fact that lawyers rather than theologians controlled the terms of the debate. However, he shows no desire to tackle the political issue of what a chaplain or a soldier (or a sending church) should do or say in the case of this war which, even if it might (just) pass the “justus ad bellum” criteria, was democratically resisted by millions of citizens of nations across the world, was arguably illegal under the UN charter, caused many civilian deaths, and above all was based on an outrageous lie about Saddam's non-existent weapons of mass destruction.

Perhaps the most interesting issue from a sociology of religion point of view was the discussion of liturgy in the military context. In this context the chaplain is the ritual specialist, even though parade services have long ceased to be compulsory. I was surprised as an outsider (who never attends civic services of remembrance) just how important the traditions of the Church of England remain in military life. It seems that both officers and ranks, believers and unbelievers alike appreciate forms of worship and ritual which have long been superseded in the more “lively” sections of the church. The role of ritual is particularly significant in the context of repatriation ceremonies for the fallen, and resonates with the new sacredness of “our boys” in popular culture, and the tabloid media coverage of “royal” Wootton Bassett in recent years. One wonders how far the spiritualities of remembrance, of tragedies such as Hillsborough, the impromptu roadside shrines at the scene of traffic accidents and the national outpouring of tears and flowers on the death of Diana in 1997 have influenced the squaddies on parade and the chaplains' ministry as religious professional among them. But any act of worship provided by the established church in a military institution can only be seen as civil religion with a vengeance, a situation where Christian words and liturgies are occupied by an invading force.

The various authors talk at length about their ministry of pastoral care among the soldiers with whom they serve. The spirit of “Woodbine Willy” is alive and well, less often these days in the trenches, but more frequently in messroom conversations. Sometimes these will be about past or potential situations in the field which raise moral questions; more often perhaps about relationships back home, or about Saturday night out behaviour and its consequences. But there is a surprising absence of discussion about the potential or spiritual lives of soldiers as disciples of Jesus Christ. In most other social institutions from prisons to merchant banks there are groups of believers who may meet together for bible study or fellowship, or even to run an Alpha course. Do such groups exist in the military? And if so what would be the role of a chaplain?

There are some other surprising omissions in the coverage of the book, for example the lack of mention of the class dimension between officers and the ranks and an almost total silence on gender issues, despite the expanding role of women in the military and on ethnicity when serving soldiers are drawn from a multiracial, multifaith and Commonwealth wide, society.

At the very end of the book the argument for chaplaincy is summed up by Todd and Butler as “embracing of the purpose of military engagement enables the chaplain to engage in mission which is thoroughly contextual, concerned with the inculturation of the gospel, and open to discerning the presence of God in the midst of armed conflict, however strange that may sound to those who are theologically suspicious of the military.” And in the final paragraph they state, I think in frustration, that “the sending churches must also be supportive of the use of lethal force by an appropriately authorised military in support of peace and justice”. Despite the welcome challenge of intellectual engagement with this well written and informative volume, I personally remain convinced that I do not wish to be a member of such a “sending church”. To do so would be too much of a sell out to Constantinian religion, an acceptance of a vastly under-realised eschatology and a stifling of the prophetic and counter cultural calling that is placed upon the community of those who owe allegiance to the Prince of Shalom. Canons are meant to be fired, and military chaplains should be too.

Review 2 – Anthony Riley

I write this review from the perspective of a Christian who still is coming to terms with his own experiences of serving as an infantry soldier in Iraq and reconciling his position in “just war theology” with the strong pacifist traditions within our faith. It was difficult reading at times as I very much sympathised with many of the first-hand accounts of ministering and witnessing to the faith within a theatre of operation. The dilemmas faced by serving Christian soldiers are in many ways similar to those faced by chaplains. Much of the testimonies I read brought me back to where I was ten years ago - under fire and having to make ethical, moral and legal decisions regarding my own actions and those of the men around me. My experience of the role of chaplain is limited during my service. I have known them within the battalion during peace and also during conflict. As there is usually only one chaplain per battalion it is difficult for the grass roots rank and file soldier to get truly intimate access to them, unless tragedy happens. In my opinion the success of a chaplain is measured on their presence around the battalion – as the book rightly recognises, the standard of morality they display themselves and their moral courage in speaking up and out if the situation arises. Sadly during my tour our chaplain failed in all these areas and as a result received much criticism within the public sphere.

The collection of papers, in part, looks at the relationship between the chaplain and their sending Churches. It seeks to identify and explore areas of contention between the mission of a chaplain and the dilemma of serving two masters – The Church's mission and the military mission. It discusses the possible conflicts of interest that come about with the incoherence of many churches' positions that support the role yet do not fully engage in the ethics or dialogue regarding armed conflict. It is this incongruence some of the authors wish to highlight. There is a recognition that this needs to be addressed by the sending churches as well as the chaplains themselves. Many of the contributors question the silence of the national churches in regards to the process of getting to war and our actions once engaged in military conflict.

The authors by and large suggest that military Chaplaincy exercises a “positive moral role” on the international stage and within the theatre of conflict. In their very presence of actually being there alongside serving combat forces, they share in the same physical and moral courage exercised daily by their comrades. Through their pastoral, ceremonial and moral presence it is suggested, somewhat contentiously, that they provide a force multiplying factor to a unit's operational strength and effectiveness. Within this assertion the authors try to explore the ethical dilemmas and incongruence of the chaplain's role and their sending churches' primary missions. This is significantly highlighted and explored by the fact the military chaplaincy exercise an “all souls ministry” regardless of the personal background of the combatant. Within this ministry there is some discussion regarding the chaplain's legal duties to enemy combatants and detainees. There is some, but little reference, to the damning criticism regarding a chaplain and core participant of the Baha Mousa public enquiry which concluded in the recognition of his failure in the duty of care towards the presumed enemy.

Explored well within the book is the changing scope of law, morality and technology in international conflict. It rightly recognises that morality has been substituted in favour of legality within the law of armed conflict and seeks to establish theology as a possible route for balancing the difference. It rightly observes the nature of Afghanistan and much of the action as a result of the “War on Terror” as unconventional warfare. It correctly recognises that the historical Just War theories do very little in providing a moral or legal prerogative to action. Something may be legal but it does not necessarily make it ethical or moral and therefore what are the churches and or the chaplain's response to this?

The broad range of contributors in the book serves to demonstrate the deep and sometimes conflicting understandings of the role of chaplain. If chaplains are there to provide morale and in effect be *force multipliers* then they are also called to be deeply involved in the education of the troops and to be example of the moral and ethical – and sometimes with much courage. It is widely held across the book that they cannot divorce the pastoral from the political and it is at this junction that moral dilemmas are often felt the most. Many examples are drawn upon in the thick of combat or operational briefings that demonstrate this effectively.