# Agents of Peace in Theaters of War:

## Re-Thinking the Role of Military Chaplains

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Something new and important is underfoot in the international world of military chaplains—or so it seems to me as an outside observer. As Canadian Forces chaplain Major S. K. Moore has argued in a recent doctoral dissertation titled *Military Chaplains as Agents of Peace* (2008),[1] the ministry of reconciliation is increasingly recognized as complementary role of deployed chaplains. Traditionally, operational chaplains have had a pastoral and sacramental mandate; their ministry has been to attend to broadly understood spiritual needs of deployed military personnel, often reaching to their families, whether in wartimes or in peacetimes. Moore has called this the "internal operational mandate" of military chaplains. It's the bread and butter of what they do.

[1] Major S. K. Moore, CD, *Military Chaplains as Agents of Peace: The Theology and Praxis of Reconciliation in Stability Operations Based on the Writings of Miroslav Volf and Vern Neufeld Redekop* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Saint Paul University, Ottawa, Canada, 2008). Impressive was the vision and support of his superiors and fellow Head Quarter chaplains for his work on this thesis.

In addition to this primary mandate, over the past decades a secondary role has slowly emerged. Moore calls it the "external operational mandate." In today's world, he contends, the pivotal role of chaplains' remains serving the troops, albeit, fostering reconciliation in conflict zones is increasingly becoming a complementary ministry. The very fact that a major international conference such as this one was organized on "The Role of the Chaplain in Reconciliation and Healing in Post-Conflict Reconstruction" suggests that the "external ministry" of military chaplains is not just Major Moore's dream born out of a mere spiritual impulse and his own and others' positive experiences in Bosnia and Afghanistan. If I am not mistaken, we are witnessing an emerging worldwide movement to adopt reconciliation as one of an operational chaplains' proper roles.

**Military Chaplains, Justice, and Violence**

*Military chaplain*s as agents of *reconciliation*!? Isn't there something peculiar, possibly even self-contradictory, in such a proposal? In the minds of many soldiers and civilians alike, armies exist to fight wars on behalf of sovereign states, and their chaplains' task is to support them spiritually in that mission. If this indeed is the purpose of armies, then two characterizations of the role of military chaplains present themselves.

The first characterization would claim that if a war is unjust (and many people consider many wars to be unjust), chaplains end up by default as agents of violent injustice, not of peace. Instead of uniting people in a divided world, they give religious legitimization, indeed blessing, to deepening the divisions between people in even bloodier ways than would otherwise occur.

Alternatively, the second characterization would claim that if a war is just (and many people will think that such wars are rare), military chaplains function as servants of justice. That's a happier place for military chaplains to be: instead of legitimizing and fomenting violence, they help smooth the path of justice. And yet even in this case, military chaplains would not be engaged in a ministry of reconciliation. Armies wage just wars mainly to defend territories and contain enemies, not to make peace, and in their own way chaplains participate in this soldiers' mission.

Given the classical account of the purpose of armies, then, it seems that military chaplains, in their official role, cannot be agents of peace. If they have a ministry of reconciliation, it will be an internal one of helping to ease the tensions and conflicts that undoubtedly rage among soldiers in stressful situations, as well as within their individual souls. But externally, military chaplains would either serve the cause of violent injustice or of justice violently enforced.

How, then, can military chaplains have an external operational ministry of reconciliation?

## Keeping Peace in a Globalized World

The world has changed; therefore, the role of armies has partly changed as well. Most of the relevant changes are connected with one of the most significant forces shaping the world today—the force of globalization. Let me highlight four features of our globalized world and indicate why they make military chaplains' external ministry of reconciliation not only possible but also sorely needed.

First, we live in an *interconnected and interdependent* world. The world of relatively self-sufficient sovereign states is rapidly giving way to a world in which both the positive and negative effects of political and economic actions in one place can quickly be felt on the opposite side of the globe. Increasing interdependence has significantly diminished the self-sufficiency of sovereign states. It has also made instability in one nation a problem for, and therefore a concern of, many nations.

Second, *human rights* are emerging as a common moral vocabulary of the globalized world (even if it is true that people from different cultures and religions understand human rights partly differently). As a result, concern for egregious violations of human rights does not stop at the borders of sovereign states. Humanitarian interventions—such as the one undertaken recently in Kosovo, for instance—and not only peacekeeping missions, are increasingly demanded by the moral conscience of the world community.

Third, *democratic ideals* are alive around the globe. Individuals and communities expect to have a say in ordering their social world; they demand freedom to live in accordance with their cultural mores and their deep convictions about the self, social relations, and the good. Lasting and violent conflicts will often result if people are denied the right to govern themselves. And exactly because people embrace democratic ideals, peace cannot be achieved in a top-down fashion, mainly by the exertion of force, without understanding and honoring people's ways of life.

Fourth and finally, *religions* are among the *most potent forces* in the world today. Religions give meaning and a sense of belonging to billions of people, provide solace in times of personal and communal crises, and bindingly orient their behavior. Given the continued numerical growth of religions worldwide and their increasing public role, religions will remain a significance force in the years to come. Religions are, of course, ambivalent—they can serve as forces for both ill and for good, as catalysts of violent conflicts and as indispensible resources for making and sustaining peace.

In a sentence, ours is an interconnected and interdependent world in which human rights, political democracy, and particular religious loyalties matter profoundly. Together, these four elements of our globalized world create conditions for conflicts between distinct communities within and around the borders of sovereign states (e.g. the right of self-determination by an ethnic community often held together by common religious belonging). But these same elements of our globalized world motivate outside interventions to contain and resolve these conflicts (*e.g.* moral outrage at egregious

violation of human rights or fear of the negative consequences if the conflict is not contained). So the role of armies is changing in response to this changed world. Even if the defense of sovereign states remains their primary purpose, increasingly armies are called on to engage in peacekeeping and peacemaking missions—whether these involve merely monitoring brokered peace (classical peacekeeping), providing safe-havens and protection for humanitarian aid amidst continuing conflict (the so-called "wider peacekeeping"), or giving support to nascent democratic governments in nation building ("provincial reconstruction teams").

With the changing role of the military, the role of its chaplains must change as well. To the extent that force is insufficient to keep peace in a world in which human rights and democratic ideals matter, and to the extent that religion plays a role in defining peoples' communal identities and in fomenting conflict, chaplains' external ministry of reconciliation may be an essential component of the success of an army's peacekeeping mission. After all, ideally military chaplains know the world of religion—they understand religious teachings, rituals, and practices, and they can help create bridges across religious divides. It makes eminent sense to enlist them to do just that—in Moore's terms, to add to their internal operational mandate an external one. The ministry of chaplains, then, becomes an extension of the mission of the army in which they serve. In addition to providing spiritual support to officers and soldiers as they engage in the army's mission, they also stand shoulder-to-shoulder with soldiers in facing the world of conflict. United by a common purpose, each in their own way, they seek to keep the peace that can be kept and make the peace that remains to be made.

If I have sketched correctly the shift in the role of chaplains and the aspects of globalization processes which motivate that shift, military chaplains stand at the cusp of an exciting and potentially immensely significant new era of ministry.

**A Major Obstacle**

This opportunity is not without a major obstacle, however. Over the recent centuries, critics have repeatedly leveled one major criticism against religions, and in particular against monotheistic faiths. Religions, they contend, are violent. Some critics argue that religions are violent by their very nature (say, because religions are by nature irrational, or because at the heart of all religions lies a combat myth according to which "good" or the "power of light" has to overcome "evil" or the "forces of darkness").

Other critics grant that religions may not be violent by nature, but they insist that religions spark violence in many concrete situations. Take any conflict you wish, they maintain, and if the people involved are religious, they will appeal to their faith to justify any violence they are perpetrating and to motivate themselves and their co-religionists to engage in it. In situations of conflict, religious people transmute mundane interests—such as the desire for power, wealth, territory, or glory—into holy causes and they turn their enemies into God's enemies. Why? So that with good conscience they can do what is unconscionable—oppress and kill, pillage and destroy, occupy and scorch!

Religious people have a ready answer for such critics who deride religion as violent. It is that those who use faith to justify violence are *misusing* faith *precisely to the extent* that they are doing what the critics object to. Motivated by self interest, religious people are then falsely proclaiming to be sacred what their very faith tells them is in fact utterly base. As a Christian, I would argue that Christian faith when properly understood and faithfully practiced fosters peace rather than legitimizing violence. Adherents of other religions would make a similar argument for their faith as well. But even if this rebuttal by religious people is plausible, it is troubling how often our faiths in fact do get implicated in violence—from Bosnia to Sri Lanka, from the caves in Afghanistan to subways in Tokyo, from temples in India to the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Palestine. These actual and disturbing malfunctions of faith blow wind into the critics' sails.

The temptation to misuse religion to legitimize violence is greatest when religion is associated with power—either power to be defended or power to be acquired. Let me venture a generalization: the closer a religion is to power, the more likely will be its misuse to legitimize violence. If true, this generalization presents a problem for military chaplains. By definition, they are close to power; indeed, they function in the service of a power—the power of the state embodied in the might of its military. The challenge of military chaplains as they embark upon this new path of external, reconciliatory ministry is how to ensure that the allegiances and obligations stemming from their service to the army (which is their primary ministry) do not limit the occasions and undermine the goals of their external ministry of making peace. If military chaplains fail to meet that

challenge to merely serve the power without challenging it, their role as agents of peace is in danger to be seen as a mask that merely hides the face of an enforcer of justice or, in the worst case, a purveyor of violence.

So how can military chaplains meet that crucial challenge? How can they function effectively as agents of reconciliation?

**Fundamental Choices: Functions of Faith**

Along with all other religious people and religious professionals, military chaplains are faced with two fundamental choices that will determine their success or failure. One concerns how they understand the functions of faith, and the other, where they place their ultimate loyalty. Let me start with faith's functions. As I see it, most faiths have four basic and mutually reinforcing functions.

First, faith—or rather, for most religions, divinity as the object of faith—is a source of *blessing*. Believers trust in God's promise to help bring their efforts to successful completion. More basically, they trust that even when any of their projects fails, they themselves will ultimately flourish as persons.[2]

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[2] For these functions of religion see Miroslav Volf, "God at Work," *Word & World*, 25 (4/2005), 38

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Second, faith is a source of *deliverance*. In life's tight spots, when external circumstances and even personal health threaten to oppress or destroy, religious people trust that God can deliver them and bring them into a "wide space" of flourishing.

Third, faith is a source of *guidance*. For believers, faith ultimately defines what is right and what is wrong, which courses of action to take and which to avoid. For the most part, of course, God does not whisper concrete commands into a believer's inner ear, and much room remains for reasoned deliberation. But faith offers parameters in which a well-lived life should move.

And fourth, faith is a source of *meaning*. It offers an overarching interpretation of reality within which the life of each individual finds its proper and unique purpose, and which shapes what it means to live well, what counts as blessing and deliverance. Christian faith, for instance, tells a large story of how God creates and redeems the world, and each person's story acquires meaning within that large story of God's dealings with humanity.

Given these four functions of faith, where does a fundamental choice come in? Most of us would rather think of ourselves as objects of God's blessing and deliverance than as God's servants constrained (as we wrongly think) by God's commands and God's ways with humanity. So we split up what belongs together: we embrace God's blessing and deliverance and reject God's guidance and purposes. The result is kind of a magical religion: we function as fully independent masters of our own lives, living as we please and pursuing goals we deem worthy of our efforts, while availing ourselves of God's

power to help our efforts to succeed and to deliver us when we are endangered or have in some way failed. In the process, we turn faith into a spiritual "performance enhancing drug" and divine "band-aid."

This approach, which effectively makes God our servant and we God's masters, is a fundamental misuse of religion with pernicious effects, especially in conflict situations. For if God is there simply to do our bidding, then when it comes to military missions God becomes a kind of spiritual super-weapon, and the military chaplain's job is to operate it.

**Fundamental Choices: Ultimate Loyalty**

As for any religious person or religious professional, so also for military chaplains the matter of ultimate loyalty is of utmost importance. Indeed, this is *the most important* religious issue of all.

For Christians the teaching of Jesus about the object of ultimate loyalty is plain. Responding to the question of which commandment is primary, Jesus answered: "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength'" (Mark 12:29-30). God, just on account of being God, deserves and demands total loyalty. As the Apostle Paul says, God is the one from whom, and through whom, and for whom are all things, and therefore God alone is the proper object of

utter trust and complete devotion. To value anything above God and to trust anything more than God would mean to make two grave mistakes in one: to divinize some creature by relating to it as though it were God, and to dishonor God by relating to God as though God were not divine.

Human love for God must be total, Jesus commanded, echoing the Hebrew Bible. But surprisingly enough, total love for God is decidedly not exclusive, as though God were the *only* object worthy of love. Jesus continued his response to the question about the most important commandment by saying: “The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:31). And In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus called the second command of like importance to the first. Total devotion to God does not exclude love of neighbor, rather, *demands* it. As is well known, “neighbor” in the Christian tradition is not a person who lives in one’s proximity, who belongs to the same organization, cultural or religious community, or nation. One’s “neighbor” is any person in need—whether she is part of one’s community or some alien community, whether he is one’s friend or a sworn enemy. God’s love knows no boundaries but encompasses all human beings indiscriminately and unconditionally. The love of those who give God their ultimately loyalty must love all human beings as God loves them. To fail to do so is to fail to love God as God ought to be loved—indeed, demands to be loved.

Most religious people struggle with ultimate loyalty. Military chaplains, however, face special challenges in this regard given the nature of their operational mission. On

the one hand, as professionals they owe unswerving loyalty and obedience to an army which itself owes ultimate loyalty to a sovereign state (even if it is true that a system has been designed for chaplains to operate outside the “chain of command” so that their prophetic voice can be heard). On the other hand, as religious people they owe loyalty to the precepts of their own faith, in the case of Christians to a God who demands total devotion as well as love of all human beings. How are these two loyalties related? *Must* they clash? What happens when they do clash?

“No one can serve two masters,” said Jesus, explaining that it is impossible to serve both God and wealth (Matthew 6:24). The principle also applies more broadly, whether what a person is serving is one’s own pleasure, one’s organization, one’s ethnic (or religious!) community, or one’s state. It is not possible to have two objects of ultimate loyalty. From a religious point of view the matter is rather simple: if the army demands the ultimate loyalty of a chaplain and the chaplain complies, he will betray his religious faith just because he will then have robbed God of divinity and invested it in a creature. But when ultimate loyalty is misplaced and the Master is mutated into the ultimate servant, the doors for misusing religion to justify violence are flung wide open.

So how can military chaplains prove wrong the critics who claim that religion foments violence? By reserving their ultimate loyalty for God and by refusing to reduce religion to a spiritual “performance enhancing drug” and a divine “band-aid.” The central issue for military chaplains, then, is this: Will the army, as the earthly master of its chaplains, give them enough space to undertake the external mission of

reconciliation in a way that is governed by the chaplains' ultimate loyalty to the Master of the Universe?

**Elements of Reconciliation**[3]

As you have certainly noted, I have reflected on religion and the role of military chaplains from a decidedly Christian point of view. I have two good reasons for being religiously "parochial." First, I don't think there is such a thing as a generic and universal religion of which all particular religions are but local expressions. So I have to speak from the point of view of a particular religion. Second, I am a Christian theologian, so I think it wise to speak from a Christian point of view (though I see no reason why my being a Christian would have prevented me *in principle* from speaking from a Buddhist, a Muslim, or any other religious point of view). I will continue to speak in a Christian voice as I explore paths to peace and the elements of reconciliation, and I trust that representatives of other religions will make allowances and be nudged to reflect on whether, after appropriate adjustments, what I say may have any bearing on how they would put things from their own perspectives.

Drawing on the wisdom of the Christian faith, we can eliminate two inefficacious approaches to peacemaking. First, authentic peace will not result from a greater force's subduing a lesser force and thus ending violence. To subdue violence by force is not to

[3] On reconciliation see Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

overcome animosities, but to interrupt them and drive them underground. As much as such interruption of violence is sometimes necessary, it is a far cry from genuine peace, which in the Hebrew tradition of *shalom* means not simply the absence of conflict but also the presence of human flourishing. Second, peace will not result from the enforcement of strict justice. In the complex world of human affairs, enacting strict justice is not possible; even if it were possible, it would likely result in stunted living enveloped in deadly calm, rather than in peace in which human beings flourish in community with one another.

It takes *love* to make peace, and it takes peace to achieve reconciliation. It has been said many times that Christianity, at least in its normative versions, is a religion of love. Its central claim is that God is love and as such God loves not only those who are lovable but also those who most decidedly are unlovable. In the Christian account, the active love of God toward those who are divinely unlovable is the key to reconciliation between God and humanity and thus the model for reconciliation in human relationships. But what are some essential components of this reconciliation whose heart is love?

First, *desiring*. Scaling the steep and treacherous slope of reconciliation is a free act. The process cannot be imposed from the outside. The desire for it must be born from within. To reconcile we must desire—however tenuously, haltingly, and ambivalently—to embrace the enemy. That is the most difficult first step. For Christians, it is a step born out of the belief that both we and our enemies are loved by one and the

same God. We honor that one God of infinite love to whom we owe our ultimate allegiance *especially* when we love our enemies. We live faithfully to our true purpose as children of that God when we replicate in our own way God's love for sinful humanity.

Second, *seeing*. The desire to reconcile will be throttled if we do not make space in our imaginative worlds for our enemies, if we do not attempt to see ourselves as our enemies see us, or to see our enemies the way they see themselves—in short, entertain their perspective. It will not have the last word—we'll make our own judgment as to what we think of them, of ourselves, and of our relationship. But true reconciliation requires understanding, and understanding requires entertaining their perspective.

Third, *forgiving*. In every conflict there is much to forgive, on all sides. But forgiving will be false, difficult, and counterproductive if it simply disregards the wrongdoing. The coin of forgiveness has two sides: naming the wrongdoing as wrong ("calling it like it is"), to which the wrongdoer *should* respond with repentance; and releasing the wrongdoer from deserved punishment, to which wrongdoer *should* respond with acts of restitution. There is, if you wish, an elemental unfairness at the heart of forgiveness: a person owes but is not required to pay. The true name of this unfairness is love, scandalous and difficult love, but beautiful and noble in its scandalousness and difficulty. And just because this strange love of the unlovable

transcends what the careful calculation of debts requires, forgiveness is full of promise.[4] The future belongs to the forgivers and the forgiven, to paraphrase the title of a justly famous book by a great son of South Africa, Desmond Tutu.[5]

Fourth, *trusting*. Reconciliation requires *more* than forgiveness. For forgiveness unburdens the future of past wrongdoing, but it does not establish community. *That* requires the restoration of mutual trust. Forgiveness by the wronged crowned with repentance and restitution by the wrongdoer opens the way toward trust—trust that the wrongdoer will not repeat the wrongdoing, and trust that the wronged will not retaliate. But for trust to take root, a new pattern of relating must emerge. If it does not, the whole process of reconciliation will halt, and may even have to start over.

The fifth and final element of reconciliation is *healing*.[6] All conflicts—whether personal, communal, or national—are fueled by memories of past wrongs. As fuel for conflict, any memory will do—accurate memory, completely fabricated memory, or, as is mostly the case, distorted memory. Reconciliation will not happen, and any progress made toward reconciliation will be subverted, unless memories are healed—unless instead of deepening the divides between people they serve as bridges between them. Healed and healing memories are always *truthful* memories embraced by both parties, for untruthful memories of wrongs—suffered or committed—are unjust and therefore

[4] On forgiveness see Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge. Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

[5] Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (Image, 2000).

[6] On healing of memories see Miroslav Volf, The End of Memory. Remembering Rightly in a Violent World (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

injurious memories. Healed and healing memories are also *charitable* memories. In them, both perpetrator and victim appear as creatures comprising the mixture of good and evil they truly do, and both are recognized as unlovable human beings nevertheless loved by God. Moreover, in healed and healing memories the wrongdoing is remembered with hope for full reconciliation between the wrongdoer and the wronged.

The five elements of reconciliation I have just sketched cannot happen on their own. As a process, reconciliation between peoples needs an environment of economic sufficiency, political stability, and personal and communal security. Peacekeeping soldiers, if they do their work well, create the requisite outward *conditions* for reconciliation. And military chaplains can then initiate and, collaborating with civilian partners, guide the process of reconciliation through its various stages.

**A Challenge**

As I have sketched chaplains' external operational ministry, it is aligned with the mission of soldiers. The goal of both is peacemaking. Soldiers and chaplains contribute to that goal in their own specific way, soldiers by creating zones of safety and chaplains by guiding the process of reconciliation. But how does this goal of peacemaking soldiers and chaplains relate to the main goal of every army, which is to defend sovereign states from all external enemies?

When we reflect on wars in religious and moral terms (rather than simply in terms of national or communal interests), we invoke the category of “justice.” The cause for war must be just (*ius ad bellum*), and wars need to be fought justly (*ius in bello*). In the unpredictable and dangerous world of wars, in which stakes are always very high, justice is a tall order for any army to achieve. But still, justice is the goal. But in my reflection on peacekeeping missions of a deployed contingent and on chaplains’ ministry of reconciliation, I have argued that the concern for justice is insufficient. Even more, I have contended that reconciliation will be impossible if the agents of reconciliation and the people they seek to reconcile are guided only by the demands of justice. Reconciliation demands love, not merely justice.

There seems to be a tension, possibly even a contradiction, between the mission of an army and its chaplains to defend a sovereign state and their mission to keep and make peace. The first is guided by justice, and the second by love. Can we bring these two missions under the same moral umbrella? I think that we can. Here is roughly how.

First, love and justice are not opposed to one another. Love, understood as benevolence and beneficence, goes beyond justice in doing more than what justice requires, but everyone who commits injustice transgresses against love. Second, the obligation to love extends to all people—perhaps especially to a weak and vulnerable third party whose rights have been violated and whose life has been threatened. Love requires defending the defenseless. Furthermore, to defend the defenseless against an aggressor does not necessarily mean to give up on reconciliation so as to pursue

retribution. It *can* mean to bring an end to violations so that the process of reconciliation can commence. Finally, the action of defending the defenseless can and should be itself guided not only by the demands of justice but ultimately by the goal of reconciliation, by the vision of peace.

If this relation between defense and reconciliation as well as between justice and love is correct, then it may be possible for an army and its chaplains to maintain a single overarching goal in their dual missions of defending sovereign states and of peacekeeping. That overarching goal is the goal of *establishing* peace.[7] Is it possible for soldiers and military chaplains to engage *all* their missions as peacemakers? From the perspective of the Christian faith, this question is the most important one for soldiers and military chaplains to answer.

**Conclusion**

We have traveled a long and maybe surprising road in the course of this talk. We started with the relatively novel and exciting idea of military chaplains as agents of peace in theaters of war and concluded by entertaining the idea that in *all* of their missions soldiers might be able to see themselves as agents of peace as well. Spurred on by important practical as well as academic work done by Major S. K. Moore, I offered a vision for rethinking the role of armies and military chaplains around the practice of

[7] See Oliver O'Donnovan, *The Just War Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

peacemaking. Is this vision realistic? Though I myself served as a soldier for one year, my own knowledge of the military is too limited to answer this question. I know a bit more about religions, and in particular about the Christian faith. I *can* state confidently that soldiers and military chaplains stand at a threshold of a unique opportunity: to view the entirety of their mission under the rubric of peacemaking. If they do, their mission will echo in a small but real way God's mission in the world. God is the God of peace just because God is the God of infinite, indiscriminate, and unconditional love. And it is because Jesus called this God his Father that he said: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9).