

The Ambiguity of the Christian Chaplain as Representative of Church and the Military

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History of the Chaplaincy

Chaplains have existed in the United States from the very beginning. The Continental Congress established chaplains as an integral part of the Continental Army in July 1775, while in a few months later in November, Congress established the Navy Chaplaincy. Beginning with revolutionary war, hundreds of military chaplains have died in all US wars, including 182 in World War II and 117 in the Civil War. In the Vietnam War, 15 chaplains died, including Father Capadanno.

Chaplains have the rank of a military commissioned officer and serve the dual roles of religious leader and staff officer, but do not possess the duties or responsibilities of command. Since 1864, service regulations further prohibit chaplains from bearing arms and classify chaplains as noncombatants. Today, U.S. military chaplains represent specific religious communities, and work together within the pluralistic context of the military to ensure freedom of religion and separation of church and state. Chaplains are appointed as officers in the Army, Navy, and Air Force. The Navy directs its Chaplain Corps to provide chaplains for the Marine Corps, the Coast Guard, and the Merchant Marine.

The US military does not license or ordain any person. For Christian chaplains,

therefore, they must be ordained by their church, or in the case of some churches like the Mormons or the Quakers, who don't have ordained clergy, they must be recognized by their church as a religious leader. Chaplains in the military represent more than 200 denominations. Conservative Protestants comprise the largest percentage of Christian chaplains. The denominations with the largest representation (more than 100, both active and reserve) are: Southern Baptist Convention (787), Roman Catholic Church (350), United Methodist Church (274), Evangelical Church Alliance (174), Assemblies of God (153), Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (149), and Evangelical Lutheran Church In America (128).¹ Regarding Christian clergy, the military follows a general rule of accepting 3 groups of clergy in equal numbers, namely Catholic priests, mainline Protestant ministers, and evangelical or conservative ministers. In reality, however, the latter evangelical group comprises the largest numbers of chaplains, but this is appropriate given that they meet the spiritual needs of the largest percentage of military personnel.

What is the role of the chaplaincy in the armed forces? The Department of Defense describes the chaplain's task as the following:

accommodate religious needs, to provide religious and pastoral care, and to advise commanders on the complexities of religion with regard to its personnel and mission, as appropriate. As military members, chaplains are uniquely positioned to assist Service members, their families, and other authorized personnel with the challenges of military service as advocates of religious, moral, and spiritual well being and resiliency.²

This definition concentrates on the pastoral responsibilities of the chaplains. Chaplains are there to serve the individuals for whom they are responsible and in whatever circumstances the latter

¹ Carter, Joe. "9 Things You Should Know About Military Chaplains." thegospelcoalition.org

² Carter, "9 Things You Should Know."

find themselves, including armed conflict. They are also responsible for liturgy and conducting Christian worship and education. In today's conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, however, chaplains are given additional instructions to assist the military in presenting a "kinder face" to the largely Muslim community. The important question here is whether the chaplain being used by the military to carry out its purposes which usurps the Christian mission as pastor, teacher, and servant. From the military's standpoint the chaplain provides a pastoral and communicative roles, but not other tasks that belong to the church, namely its prophetic and missional roles. The chaplain, as a military officer, stands in the chain of command, which limits the prophetic role of challenging political authority, Moreover, the chaplain is forbidden from proselytizing or evangelizing persons, which conflicts with the church's mission. Inasmuch as the Christian chaplain, therefore, is a representative of both the church and the military, the military as the upper hand. This points to the deep reality of the chaplaincy as an ambiguity, which we turn to next.

Ambiguity of the Chaplaincy

It might be clear at this point that there is a deep-seated ambiguity in the role of the military chaplain. The root of ambiguity is the twofold commitment to the church and the state, which makes the Christian chaplain both an officer of the military and a representative of the church. In his important article, "The Paradox of the Military Chaplain," Alan Wilkerson states his thesis: "The very existence of a military chaplain is a paradox. Their role is replete with ambiguities."³ Wilkerson explores this paradoxical 'eschatological tension' within eight examples

³ Alan Wilkerson, "The Paradox of the Military Solder," *Theology* 84 (1981): 249.

of the military role of chaplains, but they can be summarized as basically two problems. First, as a Christian priest or minister, the dilemma of the chaplain can lead to conflict between representing Christ, the peace-maker, in a institution that practices violence. How can the chaplain be both a follower of Christ and the military, as a war-making body? This conflict is not unique to a chaplain, but to any Christian who wrestles with the ethical conflicts of war. The second, as stated before, is the tension in this dual representative role of the church and the military. Should the chaplain support military objectives that he or she finds immoral? Does the chaplain feel free to be a prophetic voice in the command structure? Can the chaplain support the nationalist aims of military decisions, when they are committed to the universality of gospel? At the basis of these ambiguities is a double commissioning of the chaplain as an agent of the church and the state, but the deeper conflict is between being a peacemaking disciple of Christ and an officer in the military that makes war and causes violence.

So is there any way to escape these ambiguities? Wilkinson suggests that there are three ways that most chaplains deal with these persistent dilemmas, but none of them actually solve the problem.⁴ The first is to ‘soft-pedal’ one aspect of the role and – as far as it is possible – to become either a soldier or a priest rather than both. The tension can only be resolved deemphasizing one role, while emphasizing the other. Another approach is rationalize the tension and pretend that it does not exist, which internalizes the problem. This makes an unhappy person. The third is to split life into compartments and to present a different persona in different contexts. In contexts of being a soldier the military wins, but in the context of the church, the pastor wins. All of these, however, acknowledge a common thread, namely that there is tension between the church and the military—this tension is at the heart of the chaplain’s ambiguous

⁴ Wilkerson, “The Paradox,” p. 251.

dual commission to serve God and state. This tension less of a problem when the church and state both agree on the legitimacy of war, as in the case of World War II, but it becomes problematic in wars that are morally questionable, such as every subsequent war, including Father Capadanno's Vietnam War. So is it possible that the chaplain's dilemma could be helped if both the church and the state could be brought into closer conversation about the ethics of war? Is it possible to be a disciple of Christ the peacemaker at the same time as an officer in a military the practices morally questionable wars?

Daniel Bell on the Just War as Christian Discipleship.

In his important 2009 book *Just War as Christian Discipleship*, Christian ethicist Daniel Bell has sought to address this problem by redefining the just war doctrine as a form of Christian service. He seeks to redefine "the just war tradition in terms of concrete practices that might contribute to the church's ability to make faithful moral judgments regarding justice in war then live out those judgments."⁵ This project is needed, he thinks, because a public-policy mode of just war reasoning has eclipsed a church-based mode, even among Christians.

Central to Bell's argument is the contrasting of two approaches toward the just war doctrine. The dominant method is just war as "public policy checklist," abbreviated by Bell to Just War PPC. This vision of just war "has as its starting point... modern nation-states and international law;" it "thinks primarily in terms of the laws and rules that do and/or should

⁵ Daniel M. Bell Jr., *Just War as Discipleship: Recentering the Tradition in the Church rather than the State* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), p.15.

regulate the behavior of modern-nation states in war:” and it is a “decidedly secular” vision.⁶ Just War PPC is the familiar, popular version: a set of principles that need to be satisfied for a war to be supposedly just; a checklist that leaders and op-ed writers can run down when making their case for or against an instance of military action. By contrast, just war as Christian discipleship is “an expression of the character of the Christian community; an outgrowth of its fundamental confessions, convictions, and practices; and an extension of its consistent day-to-day life and work on behalf of justice and love of neighbor (even enemies) in the time and realm of war.”⁷ Just War CD is a demanding discipline and a form of witness rooted in community, character, and spirituality.

Using this central distinction between PPD and CD, Bell makes two arguments. First, he disputes the way of looking at war as a *lesser evil* in favor of Augustine’s interpretation of war as a service of love. Second, he charts the problems that infiltrate the just war tradition under the secularizing influence of international law. Then, after a central chapter contrasting the two approaches, Bell works his way through the just war criteria. Each chapter explains a just war criterion, analyzes the similarities and differences in the approaches of Just War CD and Just War PPC regarding the criterion, and reflects on the challenges that Just War CD poses to the church. Right intent, which has been eviscerated in PPC, is refocused on the intentions to achieve peace, to do complete justice, and to love one’s neighbors, including one’s enemies. Last resort in the CD approach puts much more effort into developing alternatives to war than does the PPC approach. Proportionality under CD holds that militaries should use the minimum force needed, while the PPC interpretation allows the maximum force necessary. Legitimate authority in the PPC approach looks to the military or political powers in government, whereas the CD approach

⁶ Bell, *Just War as Christian Discipleship*, p. 74.

⁷ Bell, *Just War as Christian Discipleship*, p. 74.

also looks to the ecclesiastical authorities who also make moral judgments about particular conflicts. Bell concludes that the Just War CD restores balance among all of the criteria, even though it makes it much more difficult for the justification of war, and consequently for the chaplain who serves in a military that uses the PPC model.

Nevertheless, can his approach place the church and the military on more equal footing? Bell thinks this is possible if it can do three things: first be more willing to support conscientious objection; second, share appropriate military information with the church so that the church could render better moral advice; and three, encourage both the military and the church to rethink the role of military chaplains to ensure that they have sufficient independence from the military. These are good suggestions, but it's hard to imagine that the military would grant military independence from obeying orders, or that the military would share its secret information with the church. The problem is not that the church is willing to meet the state halfway, the problem is that the state usurps the mission of the church and makes it part of its own military strategy. For there to be greater dialogue, the entire mission and task of the state must be changed in light of the church's mission—and not the other way around.

Barth on Peacemaking

So, in the end, Bell's suggestions continue to point to the inherent conflict between the church and the military, which is but one example the conflict between church and state. In the last section of the paper, I want to explore this issue in the thought of thought of Karl Barth, arguably the greatest theologian in the 20th century and someone who wrote and was active in political life in Germany and in Switzerland. Not unlike Bell, Barth would see the tension here, but rather

than providing a more church-friendly just war theory, Barth sees the church's unique witness to the state as a *peacemaking* institution.

Just after World War II, in 1946 he wrote his most important essay on politics entitled "The Christian Community and the Civil Community."⁸ In this essay Barth describes the kingdom of God as the center of two concentric circles, of which the Christian community is the "inner circle" and the civil community is the "outer circle." Both church and state fall under the authority of God's sovereign rule. In this way, the "inner circle" by way of witness and reminder reveals to the "outer circle" that it too is centered in Jesus Christ. The church plays more than just a priestly or pastoral role in the state, as it actively calls the state to a particular political direction. On one hand, the church continues to *be* the church through its intercessory role of being a witness to the gospel, praying and working for the good of the state, making distinctions between just and unjust wars and governments, and declaring firmly that the state falls under God's rule. On the other hand, the church should also be more active in its "reminding" the state of its function, purpose, and hope as a witness to Jesus Christ, who is the sovereign Lord of the kingdom. The church fulfills its role when it rejects militarism and nationalism, and instead encourages an active *peacemaking* and global cooperation for nation-states.

The church, as the inner circle of witness, reminds the state that war is alien to the state's purpose of peacemaking. Barth writes that the church should never declare to the state that war is "a normal, fixed and in some sense necessary part of what on the Christian view constitutes the just state, or the political order demanded by God."⁹ Only in very unusual circumstances should the church be willing to support war, such as in the case of World War II. By shifting the focus

⁸ Karl Barth, *Community, State, and Church: Three Essays* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2005), pp. 149-89.

⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/4 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), p. 456. Hereafter cited as *CD* III/4.

toward the active commitment of peacemaking, and suspending arguments for the state's use of force, the argument moves away from justifications for "just war" and toward practical strategies for implementing justice and peace. Christian witness to peacemaking remains non-ideological and practical. Christians, says Barth, "cannot be pacifists in principle, only in practice."¹⁰ So, what does it mean to be a practical pacifist? For Barth, being a "practical pacifist," implies two things: 1) a "Christian concern for the fashioning of true peace among nations to keep war at bay"; and 2) a "Christian concern for peaceful measures and solutions among states to avert war" (*CD* III/4: 460). These two principles of "active peacemaking" and "averting war" provide a common vision for peacemaking for the church and civil community, and provide an alternative to any form of justification of war. The witness of peacemaking, therefore, can never be simply a synthesis between the just war and the pacifist' positions, but remains much closer to the latter. All arguments in favor of war, says Barth, "are wrong if they do not start with the assumption that the inflexible negative of pacifism has almost infinite arguments in its favor and is almost overpoweringly strong" (*CD* III/4: 455). Peacemaking actively engages practices promoting peace but also unmasking or unveiling the false illusions of human pride that the nation-state uses in both going to war (*Jus ad bellum*) and moral conduct within war (*Jus in bello*). It reincorporates the prophetic dimension missing in the definition of the chaplain's role.

Barth's position on peacemaking and war is very similar to what is today called the "just peacemaking" tradition, which is supported by many church statements on war. Some have argued there are three positions—not two—positions in Christian ethics, namely the just war and pacifist positions, but also the middle position of "just peacemaking." Christians who support

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.2 (Edinburgh:T&T Clark, 1961), p. 550.

just peacemaking are more concerned with discussion about how to “prevent war” rather than whether war ought to be seen as just or unjust. However, when war actually starts, the peacemaking “middle position” is interrupted by the reality of war, which forces Christians to take a stand for or against the current war. At that point, Christians can draw from both the just war and pacifist traditions in evaluating the current conflict, with the goal of ending the conflict and returning to their presumption for peacemaking.

So how does this affect the ambiguity of chaplaincy? The chaplain will always remain in conflict if he or she places the military and the church on equal footing. This ambiguity can be lessened, but not eliminated, by the recognition that disciplined obedience here is not to the nation-state but God’s rule as revealed in Jesus Christ as the peacemaker. The Christian chaplain’s role, therefore, is principally being a *witness* to the military that it too belongs to God’s kingdom. Standing in this more prophetic tradition, the chaplain will seek to balance the pastoral and prophetic roles. This may add to more problems, at time, encountering the command structure of the military but a firmer conviction about which Lord they actually serve.