

Why are so many military chaplains willing accomplices to the undermining of their own public Christian identities?

Crisis in the chaplaincy: Where are the soldiers of Christ?

By Alexander F.C. Webster

■ The military chaplaincy is the latest American institution to fall prey to reductionist ecumenism. To cite only the most egregious instance, the vast majority of Christian chaplains in the U.S. Army — my field of experience — consciously refrain from invoking the name of the Holy Trinity or the Son of God in their public prayers. They have thereby joined the ranks of their radically ecumenical civilian colleagues who seem to dominate municipal and regional clergy councils.

The ostensible reasons for this curious tendency would appear to be honorable: to avoid giving "offense" to non-Christian soldiers and their family members or to emphasize our ecumenical "common grounds" as children of the one true God. Why not use the words "God" or "Lord"

alone, the argument goes, when praying in mixed public gatherings, especially in command settings? Or why not pray to the "Father," as Jesus himself did when he taught us the Lord's Prayer in the Sermon on the Mount? We Christians know who the "Lord" is: must we "impose" on the Jewish or non-Christian persons who must listen to our public prayer names for God that may be offensive to them? Must *all* of our prayers invoke the name of Jesus or the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

After all, some chaplains and commanders may ask, what's in a name? And so we hear at the close of public prayer after public prayer, from one chaplain after another: "... in your holy name we pray. Amen."

This practice alarms me, and ought to

alarm any traditional Christian, whether Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant, because it represents a failure to acknowledge the truth of God's revelation of himself to us. It also creates an undue pressure on that small minority of Christian chaplains — including myself — who do not shy away from the proper, revealed name of our God in favor of what may be described charitably as a "unitarian" deity. What's in a name? Far more than most Christian chaplains seem to realize.

A dilemma confronts the chaplain

The issue at stake in this burgeoning controversy cuts to the core of the religious presence in the U.S. military. An existential dilemma confronts every Christian chaplain who endeavors to be an authentic priest or minister of the Gospel: How may chaplains remain faithful to the faith groups or denominations that endorse them for military service, while ministering effectively and fairly to the diverse contingencies that they find in their units of assignment? This is indeed a multi-faceted problem, which entails matters of personal conscience, religious integrity and theological consistency, constitutionally-guaranteed freedoms, official U.S. Army regulations, and an appropriate understanding of ecumenism and pluralism in contemporary American society. Before considering each of these facets in detail, we should situate the current plight of the military chaplaincy in its historical context.

Christian priests — Orthodox or Catholic, depending on one's ecclesial perspective — have functioned theoretically as military chaplains at least since the beginning of third century. Origen of Alexandria attempted to convince the pagan Roman authorities at that time that, while non-Christians "go forth to fight and slay as many of the enemy as they can," Christians

provide "a divine help" as "a special army" for the Roman emperors through their priestly prayers and worship.¹ The first clear indication of the presence of priests as chaplains in the imperial Roman military may be the remark by Eusebios of Caesarea in his encomium to Constantine the Great that the emperor invited Christian bishops to accompany him in a military expedition against the Persians, because he wished to include in his retinue "needful coadjutors in the service of God."

The bishops accepted the invitation so that they might "battle with and for him by supplication to God in his behalf."² Since his battle against Licinius, the rival claimant to the imperial throne, Constantine had kept selected Christian clergy close to the actual scene of battle in specially constructed tabernacles for prayer to God for divine guidance before and during military encounters and for thanksgiving afterward.³

Certainly by the fifth century, military chaplains were common in the Byzantine military. For example, in his sixth century *vita* of St. Sabas, a fifth century monk, Cyril of Scythopolis related an incident wherein the saint's parents urged him to become a chaplain for the unit commanded by his father. Ironically, St. Sabas' response was a definitive "no" on the grounds that, as a "a soldier in God's forces," he could not be incited to desertion!⁴ The Western Church, in keeping with its more specific canonical tradition, provided detailed guidance for military chaplains in Canon 2 of the Council of Ratisbon in 742 A.D.:

We prohibit the servant of God in every way from bearing arms of fighting in the army or going against the enemy, except those alone who because of the sacred office, namely for celebrating of mass and caring for the relics of the saints, have been designated for this office;

that is to say, the leader may have with him one or two bishops with their priest chaplains, and each captain may have one priest, in order to hear confessions of the men and impose upon them the proper penance.⁵

In each of these cases the Christian chaplains served their commanders and their military flocks unequivocally as priests of the Church. To be sure, after the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. the Church was no longer at odds with the Roman Empire, and with the decree of Emperor Theodosios the Great in 380 A.D. only Christians were permitted to serve in the armed forces of the Empire. The first Christian millennium, moreover, was the era of the undivided Church (save for the Non-Chalcedonian Churches at the southern and eastern extremes of the Roman/Byzantine Empire), when the Orthodox Catholic faith was, for all practical purposes, "universal" within the territorial limits of the Empire.

Christian service to the nation

Even the U.S. military chaplaincy—at least in the early years of this republic's unprecedented experiment in political and religious democracy—bears eloquent testimony to the untrammelled public expression of authentic religious faith by Christian chaplains. Chaplains first entered the Continental Army on July 29, 1775, constituting thereby the second oldest branch of the U.S. Army—after the infantry, of course. Whether or not America was founded as a specifically Christian nation, General George Washington certainly regarded his Continental Army as rendering Christian service to the fledgling nation, as the General Orders for July 9, 1776, reveal: "The General hopes and trusts, that every officer and man, will endeavor so to live, and act, as becomes a Christian Sol-

dier defending the dearest Rights and Liberties of his country."⁶

Among the first Catholic priests to function as chaplains to American soldiers were Fr. Pierre Rene Floquet, S.J., and Fr. Louis Eustace Lotbiniere. Fr. Floquet, who served without official appointment in a Canadian regiment under Colonel Hazen, never adopted the political cause of the colonials, remaining faithful to both his Church and his monarch. "I have always had the *Domini Salvum* sung at our Benedictions," he wrote, "and have offered the prayer for the King. . . ." In contrast, Fr. Lotbiniere was confirmed by the Continental Congress on August 10, 1776, as chaplain to the Canadian regiment of Colonel Livingston, an act that incurred his excommunication from the Catholic Church for disobeying the instruction of Bishop Briand of Quebec to his priests forbidding them to serve in the Continental Army.⁷ Nevertheless, he continued to serve as a military chaplain in the Philadelphia area for the duration of the American Revolution.

The public prayers of two Protestant leaders exemplify the consciously Christian style of military ministry in that era of the American military chaplaincy. The Rev. Abiel Leonard, a Congregationalist minister who served with the Third Connecticut Regiment of Continental Artillery, composed a prayer for the use of his soldiers. Included was this forthright petition:

And may I prove myself a faithful follower of Jesus Christ, whom all the armies of heaven follow: fight the good fight of faith; and have my present conflicts against the world, the flesh and the devil crowned with victory and triumph.

Chaplain Leonard concluded his soldier's prayer with the following doxology: "Hear me, O my God, and accept of these my pe-

titions through Jesus Christ, to whom with thee, O Father, and the Holy Spirit, one God, be glory, honor and praise, forever and ever."⁸ To cite one additional example, at a public ceremony that accompanied the arrival of the Declaration of Independence in Charlestown, South Carolina, on August 5, 1776, Major Barnard Elliot ministered to the men of his command, who otherwise lacked a chaplain. The conclusion of his prayer left no doubt as to the identity of the God whom he worshipped:

O Most High Jehovah, these things we ask not for any merits of our own, but the sake and thro' the merits of the most dear Son of Thy love, Christ Jesus our Lord, in whose most blessed name and words, we humbly and affectionately address Thee as Our Father. . . .⁹

In light of these unabashedly Christian precedents, the present tendency of so many Christian chaplains—particularly the senior-ranking Catholic and Protestant clergy—to forsake in public the name of the God whom they worship more privately in their own religious communities reflects, at best, a willingness to compromise unnecessarily their personal faith, evangelistic witness, and priestly or ministerial vocation.

A duty to name the deity correctly

Service to God in that capacity requires, above all, fidelity to the First Commandment in the Decalogue: the priest or minister must be able and willing to name the deity correctly, having no other "gods" before him!

In the Old Testament the meaning and value of personal names, in particular, far exceeds our appreciation of them in our present culture. According to Genesis 2:19-20, God permits Adam to name all the animals, establishing thereby his prece-



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dence and dominion over the rest of creation.

Sometimes God gives key Hebrew leaders a new name, a practice still maintained by the Orthodox when a person takes monastic vows or converts to the Orthodox faith, and by Catholics at the sacrament of confirmation or upon embarking on the religious life. In Genesis 17:4-6 God gives a new name to Abram of Ur of the Chaldees when he establishes his covenant with him—the name of Abraham, which means "father of a multitude." In the dramatic story of Jacob and the angel in Genesis 32:27-29 the angel who wrestles with the patriarch asks him what his

name is, whereupon he renames Jacob "Israel," which means "he who strives with God." But when Jacob/Israel returns the question, the angel avoids a direct answer. For the ancient Israelites, knowing and, therefore, "possessing" the name of a person gave one an advantage, even domination or power over that person. A person's identity, his self and essence were believed to be concentrated in that name.

And yet God does choose to reveal his name when Moses asks who is sending him to Pharaoh. God tells Moses his name is "I am who I am." And God tells Moses to say to Israel, "The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you: this is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations" (Exodus 3:14-15, RSV).

There is no other name

It is *this* name which the Second Commandment given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai forbids Israel to take in vain: a name with majestic meaning and profound power, a precious, awesome, unique name to be cherished and revered and uttered with humility.

The New Testament perpetuates this tradition but adds a spectacularly new dimension. With the Incarnation of the Son of God as a man, God reveals himself in a uniquely personal way.

In Philippians 2:9-11 St. Paul proclaims about Jesus Christ in language that is at once unmistakably clear and absolutely imperative, "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ

is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Not any name, but *the* name; not a merely human name, "Jesus," but also the same title, "Lord" (or *kyrios* in Greek, or *adonai* in Hebrew), by which God refers to himself when he commissions Moses; not a name that we may *choose* to use, but the name that designates a person, a divine Person, who *deserves* our worship everywhere and always.

St. Paul makes this abundantly clear in Colossians 3:17: "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." Surely, "everything" includes our prayers—the most personal, intimate, fulfilling moments of our communion with God. After all, *who* is being addressed in our prayers, whether public or private? Who is the God whom Christians *truly* worship? What is the name of the God who saves all mankind from sin and death? St. Peter answers the last question beyond a shadow of a doubt in Acts 4:12, where he says about Jesus: "[T]here is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

For Christians the Incarnation of God as Jesus has determined our necessary response in faith. The risen Lord himself commands his disciples in the Great Commission to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). Now the divine name has been revealed for all time and all places in all of its personal intimacy and splendor. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the Holy Trinity—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The God who is who he is, who is known through his creative power as the cause of all being, is also known as three Persons who are yet one God.

One of the hymns of the resurrection said by the deacon over the body and blood of Christ after the communion of the faithful in the Divine Liturgy of the Orthodox Church and Byzantine Catholic Churches exults in this exclusive revelation of God's name:

"Thy Cross do we worship, O Christ, and thy Holy Resurrection we hymn and glorify, for thou art our God: we know no other than thee; thy name do we name.

Theoretically, at least, U.S. Army regulations, reflecting the spirit of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, safeguard the priestly duty of Christian chaplains to name the God whom they worship. Chaplains are endorsed by their faith groups or denominations to serve primarily as representatives of their respective religious bodies. AR 165-20 entitled, "Duties of Chaplains and Responsibilities of Commanders," clearly enunciates this in section 1-5c: "Service as a chaplain depends on the endorsement of the chaplain's religious body." If, at any time after a clergyman is commissioned, he is deemed an unsuitable representative of his parent church or rabbinical assembly, a chaplain's endorsement may be revoked, whereupon he would become a civilian within a fortnight.

Most mute Christian identity

The considerable respect that the office of the Chief of Chaplains (who is himself a clergyman with the rank of major general) has for denominational authenticity and for the unusual prerogatives of the faith groups and denominations vis-a-vis the U.S. military is evidenced in its efforts to recruit clergy for the chaplaincy. Although rigid quotas are studiously avoided, the leadership of the military chaplaincy strives diligently to reflect the relative

demographic strength of the various religious bodies in the composition of the Chaplain Corps.

Approximately 1500 chaplains are currently serving on active duty. Roman Catholic priests constitute only about 200 of these—well below the 30 per cent recruitment goal. Only 20 rabbis and 10 Orthodox priests typically serve on active duty in any given year. That leaves the vast majority of slots to be filled by clergy of the various Protestant denominations (and the Mormons, who, inexplicably, are classified by the Pentagon as "Protestant"). The disproportionate number of chaplains from small evangelical and fundamentalist Protestant communions would seem to promise a more forthright Christian witness in military ministry. But even these

"conservatives"—especially when they attain the higher officer ranks—tend to mute their Christian identity in mixed public gatherings.

The religious integrity of all military personnel—including chaplains, ironically—is guaranteed by AR 165-20. In language redolent of the First Amendment, section 1-9a requires each chaplain assigned to a group of soldiers to "facilitate the free exercise right of all personnel, regardless of religious affiliation of either the chaplain or the unit member." It is reasonable to conclude, therefore, that priests and ministers ought to be able to express their faith freely in an open, mutually tolerant military environment, provided, of course, that they do not violate the ethical principle of non-malevolence and the spirit of mutual respect by directly attacking or vilifying other religions in mixed public gatherings. This concept of "free exercise" should be broad enough to allow for prayers that name the God—whenever it is—who any chaplain happens to worship.

Ecumenism has displaced pluralism

Section 1-10c of the same regulation seems to dispose inversely of the other half of this threat to personal conscience and religious integrity. "Chaplains will not be required," it pledges, "to perform sacraments, ordinances, and services that are in variances [sic] with the tenets or practices of their religion." Any Christian chaplain who feels constrained, either through fear of incurring the disfavor of his superior officers or by virtue of his perception of the ecumenical exigencies of his locus of ministry, to conduct religious services or offer prayers that carefully omit the name of the God whom he, as minister of the Gospel, presumably worships would be justified in claiming a violation of this regulation.

In either case, a Christian chaplain would not be able to function freely and

fully in accordance with his vocation as a priest or minister.

Why, then, are so many chaplains willing accomplices to the undermining of their own public Christian identities? The answer, I believe, lies in a confusion of "ecumenism" and "pluralism."

Although the U.S. Army—and, therefore, the U.S. Army Chaplaincy—officially subscribes to a "pluralistic" model of community, what the chaplains, by and large, seem to connote by this value is something far more grandiose than the term literally means. A typical dictionary definition would allow the coexistence of distinct social groups within a nation. Pluralism realistically describes a social condition and requires nothing more than *tolerance* of that condition—a mutual recognition of the right of various groups, whether religious or otherwise, to exist and to participate somehow in the body politic and its institutions. It does not mandate that distinctive religious bodies, for example, seek a common ground or a shared identity, nor does abiding by the spirit of pluralism obligate any religious body to regard any other as offering a viable alternative worldview or path to God. In terms of religion, a pluralistic society is merely a congeries of distinctive religious faith groups and denominations engaged in mutual competition for the souls of men, poised in a delicate tension, held together only by the tenuous bond of respect for one another's natural and civil rights. These rights most assuredly do not include among them the supposed right to be accepted or acknowledged as a legitimate expression of truth or virtue.

"Ecumenism," however, entails the fervent search for common ground among various religious groups—for some intersection of religious experience and belief. It is, despite aspirations to universal inclusiveness even to the point of grandiose delusions, inherently reductionistic, tending toward the lowest common denominator.

Ecumenism goes beyond mutual tolerance to mutual acceptance. It seeks to establish an equality of sorts in an arena where conflicting truth claims are logically unequal. It militates against communal distinctiveness and, therefore, diminishes the integrity and authenticity of religious groups in their social witness.

In the contemporary U.S. chaplaincy, ecumenism has displaced pluralism in practice, despite pretensions to the contrary. Ironically, the ecumenia that has led to the virtual silencing of the Divine Name among Christian chaplains has created the very monster that the Chaplains Corps fears most—a new military spirituality centered on a unitarian deity, which is tantamount to an establishment of religion in the U.S. Army! Not only is the First Amendment right of Christian chaplains to the free exercise of their religion routinely violated in today's Army, but the other half of the religion clause of the First Amendment also is in jeopardy.

Spiritual hypocrisy

The conclusions seem inescapable. For Christian chaplains to search for magic prayer formulas that everyone can accept, that offend no one, that allow each person to conjure his own individual image of the deity is sheer sophistry, bordering on idolatry. To avoid scandalizing non-Christians by refusing to acknowledge in public the God whom they name in private is spiritual hypocrisy and perhaps a matter of apostasy. To refer to God repeatedly as "Father" *alone* is, at best, implicit unitarianism and perhaps a blasphemy against God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. What was appropriate for Jesus during his earthly ministry may not always be initiated by Christians who live in the light of the Resurrection and in fulfillment of the Great Commission.

If Christian chaplains continue to allow a new military religion to supplant

their own religious communities as the object of their ecclesial loyalties; if they are willing to collaborate in erecting a new, ecumenical, sanitized "common faith" in the context of a Lowest Common Denominator "church"; if they are content to abandon their personal religious faith in its fullness as soon as they don the uniform of an officer in the U.S. Army; then the Christian communions—Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant—who send them into this vortex of ecumenia ought to reconsider their respective roles in the endorsement process. The Churches can hardly stand still while the military clergy who have lost their spiritual bearing and the courage of their convictions create their own super-denomination—a pseudo-religion fashioned in their own obsequious image. ■

¹ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, VIII, 73. English translation: Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (eds.), *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, IV (American reprint of the Edinburgh Edition; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956), 668.

² Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, IV, 66. English translation: Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds.), *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 1 (2d ser.; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952), 554f.

³ *Ibid.*, II, 12 (p. 503).

⁴ Quoted in Jean-Michel Hornus, *It Is Not Lawful For Me to Fight*, trans. Alan Kreider and Oliver Cohn (2d rev. ed.; Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1970), p. 76.

⁵ Quoted in Roy J. Honeywell, *Chaplains of the United States Army* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Chaplains, Department of the Army, 1958), p. 7.

⁶ John C. Fitzpatrick (ed.), *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, V (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931), p. 245.

⁷ "Letter from Father Floquet, at Montreal, to Bishop Briand in Quebec (15 June, 1760)," *American Catholic Historical Researches*, V, No. 2 (April, 1988), 66.

⁸ Adrian H. Germain, *Catholic Military and Naval Chaplains, 1776-1917* (Washington, D.C.: n.p., 1929), p. 2.

⁹ Appendix VIII in Parker C. Thompson, *The United States Army Chaplaincy—Vol. I: From Its European Antecedents to 1791* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Chaplains, Department of the Army, 1978), pp. 274, 275.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 277.