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# Christianity, The Chaplaincy, And Militarism

EUGENE F. KLUG

THE MILITARY chaplaincy, as presently conceived in our country, does not by and in itself place the church in the undesirable and awkward position of lending blessing to the country's politics or policies in the sense of a holy crusade. Nor has Christianity sold its soul to militarism. This was not true in the first war our country waged, the Revolution against the mother country, England, nor is it true now in the struggle against Communistic Viet Nam.

Lincoln likewise did not permit this issue to become clouded in the bitter war of brother against brother for the preservation of the Union. It was not a case of which side God was fighting on, but partisans of either side, as Lincoln pointed out, must have a concern that they be on the side of God, however unfortunate the struggle. The church always—and the individual believers in it—confesses its sins. Even though inalienable rights were at stake in this struggle to bring the full weight of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights to bear for all men's freedom, as well as preservation of the Union, Lincoln never thought of nor conducted the Civil War as a kind of religious crusade. In fact the very opposite was the case. Not that the issues at stake did not have religious overtones. There were definite moral implications. These were inescapable then, as they are now, and in any conflict. But religious men, and their religious leaders, chaplains on both sides of the War between the States, engaged earnestly in the pursuit of their spiritual and religious concerns and devotions, while the war swept all around them. This in itself was no strange phenomenon, as little as it would be for their civilian counterparts at any time in history to foster the faith in the midst of a world and circumstances often strange, even inimical, to their spiritual quest.

The churches, of course, have had their critics in the past, because of their readiness to supply men for the military chaplaincy. To many this appears to make the churches partners in the war system and guilty, with their chaplains, of militarism, because, so goes the charge, the chaplains "by their position as army officers, are committed to the support of the military authorities, and so lose the freedom they should have, as Christian ministers, to carry on a war against war."<sup>1</sup> The implications of this statement merit closer scrutiny, since they contain a number of common misapprehensions, most of them groundless. One possibility appears immediately and that is, that the criticism, however pious the sentiment, stems from a biased pacifist viewpoint, which judges all war *per se* to be wrong. This is an untenable view, out of touch with reality. The question is not whether killing and warfare by them-

selves do not inflict harm. Indeed they do, for they are the sinful results of sin working its ill among mankind. History bears constant mute testimony to this tragedy; but the story begins and ends with sin in man's nature. So, the brutal fact remains that no countenancing of sin, nor for that matter of war, is intended when we allude to its inevitability; but there it is nonetheless, and will always be.

In our nation's history James Madison was one of those who caught the full significance and dimension of this reality. Addressing himself to the question, "Is Universal Peace Possible?", in the *National Gazette* for February 2, 1792, Congressman Madison wrote with keen discernment concerning the vain hope of everlasting peace:

A universal and perpetual peace, it is to be feared, is in the catalogue of events, which will never exist but in the imaginations of visionary philosophers, or in the breasts of benevolent enthusiasts. It is still however true, that war contains so much folly, as well as wickedness, that much is to be hoped from the progress of reason; and if any thing is to be hoped, everything ought to be tried.<sup>2</sup>

Madison was echoing what centuries of thoughtful men had observed before with anguish in their hearts. But he was a realistic man, who knew the nature of man's heart as he knew his own, and in this regard his judgments were as sound as those of other astute students of human nature, like theologian Martin Luther, who wrote often and incisively on the same subject, including the inevitability of warfare among sinful men. Madison's policy of military preparedness which he followed as president was part of his thinking already years earlier. Before the Virginia Convention, on June 14, 1788, as the advisability of a standing militia was being argued, he injected the straightforward opinion: "I really thought that the objections to the militia were at an end. Was there ever a constitution, in which, if authority was vested, it must not have been executed by force, if resisted? . . . Can any government be established, that will answer any purpose whatever, unless force be provided for executing its laws?"<sup>3</sup>

Be this as it may, the question of militarism on the part of the churches, especially through their support of a chaplaincy program supported by the government, remains a live issue. As recently as November 2, 1966, for example, *The Christian Century* attempted to present the pros and cons in a triad of articles on the military chaplaincy. An objective evaluation on that subject is virtually an impossible task for the venerable weekly. From the time of the late Charles Clayton Morrison, its founder and editorial genius, the *Century* has aggressively pursued a dead-ahead course opposing the whole idea of clergymen in the military as employees of the government. So it was not unexpected that two of the three articles should militantly oppose the military chaplaincy

idea, nor that the editorial comments prefacing the issue should set the first barb by asking, "How the chaplains could do otherwise?" than lend support to a definite militarism by their very presence in the Armed Forces.

The two negative articles, "Chaplaincy vs. Mission in a Secular Age" by William Robert Miller, a layman now in the publishing business and an erstwhile army air corps member, and "Navy Chaplaincy: Muzzled Ministry" by Norman MacFarlane, an ex-Navy chaplain, were both obviously geared to prejudicial intent. The average reader looking for objective reporting would undoubtedly react negatively against them by their very tone, let alone the argument advanced. As to the substance of the latter, the criticisms were stock-in-trade items, like ridiculing the "sheer incongruity of a pious imitator of Christ trying to be relevant while acting as part of a system for which the Gospels made no provision whatever;"<sup>1</sup> or raising the old canard that the chaplains are "kept" or "muzzled" military lackeys who have lost their prophetic power by virtue of being partners to a closed system; or serving up the old crow which, however new the gravy, still sticks in many people's craw, that the chaplains should be commissioned officers (emphasis on *officers!*). Ordinarily this last complaint is more self-revealing of the critic than anything else, for the possibility is always present that deep-seated grudges are at work in frustrated minds that have never taken easily to the command structure within the military.

But we are not concerned here about psychological problems. More than 190 years of history have failed to prove the military chaplaincy wrong in principle or wrong because of reprehensible by-products. Constructive criticism from outside has always been welcome. Moreover, it would be unfair to the chaplains themselves and the three corps within our Armed Forces not to state that they first of all are aware of the threat which is posed for their ministry in becoming mere "pious imitators of Christ" without "prophetic" voices, more impressed with their gold braid than with the Gospel and the needs of sinful men.

The third article in the *Century* triad is by Army chaplain Albert F. Ledebuhr. His "Military Chaplaincy: An Apologia" accomplishes just that, a positive apology or brief in behalf of the chaplaincy; and it can be objectively stated that his genuinely pastoral presentation cuts neatly under the jaundiced, even bilious, critique of the opposition views. He accomplishes this by simply proving that the military chaplaincy is "an office which offers countless opportunities to present the gospel to young men many of whom are totally unacquainted with it,"<sup>2</sup> and then also by unimpassionedly demonstrating that "only when a minister is a trained soldier, sailor, marine or air man can he understand and identify with his men so as to serve them effectively."<sup>3</sup> Thereby he counters nameless and unjustifiable fears about the chaplains' officer status. Thus, while there may be some who do not want the clergy to be "fighting chaplains" (actually none carry arms), the general con-

sensus of today's fighting men is still in line with the verdict that issued from their counterparts in World War I, namely, "that the Y.M.C.A. workers and other non-commissioned religious workers were relatively useless during the war, and that, therefore, the only solution for effective work is commissioned officers with rank."<sup>7</sup>

An unsolicited testimony to the effectiveness of our Army chaplains under uniform was sent to General Harold K. Johnson, Chief of Staff, United States Army, by Billy Graham following his Christmas (1966) trip to the fighting front in Vietnam. Among other things Graham wrote:

I believe that your chaplains are the most dedicated to the task of ministering to the spiritual, moral and social welfare of our men that we have ever had in history. I didn't meet a single Army chaplain that I thought was second rate. In my opinion the chaplains are the unsung heroes of this war. I am sure that one of the contributing factors to the high morale of our men is due to the work, dedication, and ministry of these chaplains.<sup>8</sup>

The right to dissent, of course, is one of our cherished freedoms, and none of our institutions is so utterly free from fault as to escape criticism at some points. In this respect the military chaplaincy is no exception. It itself is, and ought so remain, most critical of its own structure and ministry, for the very reason that basic rights are always at stake. But carping criticism has a way of becoming irritating, particularly when it arises out of the safe complacency of ivied towers far removed from life's encounters. President Lyndon B. Johnson recently showed justifiable impatience and pique over this kind of scolding disapprobation as he conferred the nation's highest award on a combat veteran. Commending the nation in general for its patience and fortitude, the President stated that the cause in which we are now engaged, and for which men are paying the supreme sacrifice, "far outweighs the reluctance of men who exercise so well the right of dissent but let others fight to protect them from those whose very philosophy it is to do away with the right of dissent."<sup>9</sup>

In the final analysis the whole criticism of the military chaplaincy narrows down to one point. Mr. Miller expresses it in the *Century* article referred to above. "Specifically, the onus is that the chaplaincy represents a capitulation of church to state at the very center . . . of the power structure."<sup>10</sup> This would indeed be a very serious matter. However, it is not one which the churches and the government, least of all the military chaplaincy corps themselves, have been unconcerned about. Gratefully all sides acknowledge that no surrender of church to state, or vice versa, has occurred. The freedoms at stake have been amply protected by constitutional law and by carefully written military regulations, particularly as these pertain to the military chaplaincy. The conscience of a chaplain in respect of his own and his church's doctrinal stance

is carefully sheltered against wrongful encroachment or coercion. Moreover, individual religious rights of all military personnel are equally well safeguarded. Thus Mr. Miller's concern may be legitimate, but his conclusions are unfounded.

His advice is even more out of tune with our American tradition, for he suggests that "it is our task as Christians to try to bring our nation into accord with that reality, not vice versa."<sup>11</sup> What reality? It may be hard to believe, but the suggestion made would establish a kind of relationship between church and state corresponding closely to the theocracies our forebears rejected after considerable *Sturm und Drang* and testing of our Union. However, the glorious truth of history is precisely this, that our forefathers managed to see beyond the constricting, prejudicial, narrow views of the Pilgrim fathers and fashioned a government which would allow every man the basic right to worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience and not someone else's!

The Lord and His apostles likewise stood for such separation of the two spheres, the Kingdom of God, His Church, and the realm of Caesar, the State, albeit with critical interaction between the two realms. Hopefully this will always be benign and benevolent interaction, even though critical. Nothing that the chaplaincy does or stands for militates against this same concern and ideal. At least not to this point, and we trust, under God, that it never shall. To this end every citizen, as well as those most directly connected with the chaplaincy, are watchmen appointed, under God and for our country, to see that this basic freedom or principle is not trodden upon by any man.

We have gone into the criticisms voiced in the *Century* in considerable detail, simply because they illustrate in most contemporaneous way the objections that have been raised before against the chaplaincy as part of the military system. The *Century* is an influential and articulate voice. By no means is it the only source from which criticism has risen. Whole church bodies have opposed the institution on principle, as have also independent groups and individuals representing diverse viewpoints, especially militant organizations dedicated to the absolutist separation principle. Finally, however, legitimacy of the chaplaincy as an institution under our laws and its success in supplying a needed service under unusual conditions has to be recognized. Time has not changed this judgment. It has been well stated in the following paragraph:

So long as the churches admit that a Christian may serve in the army and the navy, it is clearly their duty to provide for the religious needs of the soldiers and sailors. That provision is now made through chaplains appointed and paid by the government, the candidates for the position being recommended by a committee representing the churches. This arrangement is criticized by many, partly on the ground that the reception of pay from the government unduly limits the chaplain's free-

dom, partly that his status as an army or naval officer commits him to the support of the existing military policy. Up to the present time, however, no satisfactory substitute for the chaplaincy has been found.<sup>12</sup>

Other arrangements for the spiritual nurture of the men in military service have at times been suggested—and, indeed, there are supplemental programs privately financed by individual church bodies through which they supply their members with spiritual helps in one form or another, ranging from special mailings to the erecting of servicemen's centers at strategic locations all over the world—but it can still be claimed today that no adequate substitute has been found for the military chaplaincy by which, as Chaplain Ledebuhr aptly put it, a minister may “understand and identify with his men so as to serve them effectively.”

#### FOOTNOTES

1. William Adams Brown, *Church and State in Contemporary America* (New York: Scribner's, 1936), p. 128f. The critical viewpoint expressed is not that of the author.
2. Saul K. Padover, *The Complete Madison* (New York: Harper, 1953), p. 260.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
4. *Christian Century*, Nov. 2, 1966, p. 1335.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 1332.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 1335.
7. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 163.
8. Letter of Harold K. Johnson, General, U.S. Army, dated January 13, 1967, and quoted in *Monthly Newsletter*, February 1, 1967, No. 192, Office of Chief of Chaplains, Department of the Army.
9. AP news release, quoted in *Illinois State Journal*, Springfield, Ill., December 7, 1966.
10. *Christian Century*, issue cited, p. 1337.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 1336.
12. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 276.