

Christian Service
A Theological Analysis of Serving as a Military Chaplain
By Jonathan Bailey

Posing the Question



The topic for this particular theological analysis revolves around the question: Is it possible for Christians to serve in good conscience God and country through military service in the Chaplain Corps? This question occupies one of the central debates in an era when global war looms on the horizon as terrorism and self-interests threatens the fabric of the world we live in. It is a question with no simple answers, and whether one answers affirmatively or negatively, one must think about the implications and the effects that answer may have. Therefore, the question demands a thoughtful answer that opens itself up to criticism but remains grounded in the reality of the world we live in (attached picture is from members.aol.com/veterans/warlib62.htm).

Either a yes or no answer to the question implies certain theological positions. By answering affirmatively, one de facto accepts the military as a reality of human existence. For in answering yes to this question, the individual authorizes others to join the military and it follows that others should support the military if they so chose, thereby keeping the military a thriving reality. Also, by answering yes to the question, one allows for the notion of justified violence or justified killing. While it is important to understand that as a chaplain, the chaplain is not allowed to carry any weapon or engage the enemy in any way other than in peace, the chaplain is paid by an organization that does not follow those commitments. The military trains to do its job, which necessarily involves the destruction of enemy forces and killing enemy soldiers. Thus, even serving as a chaplain validates the military in its role as a governmental institution.

However, if one answers negatively this too carries meaning. Often, those who answer in a negative manner advocate strict adherence to the commandment “Thou shalt not kill.” (Ex. 20:13, KJV) Claiming that God’s laws clearly stand opposed to war and war-making. Also, many have a view of Christ as radical pacifist that taught his disciples this same pacifism through teaching such as the Sermon on the Mount. This claim too reflects an understanding of humanity and the world that affects its judgments. It typically sees humanity as improving or lacks the more negative view of humanity that supporters of military service tend to have. However, it can be just as negative but have a more eschatological hope than those supporting military service. Nonetheless, it is clear that both answers imply many things to others besides just providing a stance on military service.

My Decision to Join the Military

My decision to join the military came while I was going into my junior year of my undergraduate education. At the time, I had been struggling with the decision for two years due to a nagging desire pulling me in that direction and monetary need. For two years, I put off my decision always thinking I had more time to decide if it was right for me. Finally, my sophomore year in May I realized it was a potentiality I would like to actualize. However, I had missed the window to join ROTC (Reserved Officer Training Corps) and would have to wait until graduation to join.

That summer the Army decided to begin a new program for juniors desiring to enter ROTC without any prior experience (ACCT- Accelerated Cadet Commissioning Training) and elected Florida as the trial state for the program. I received a call from Lieutenant Washington from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University about the program and an invitation to sign-up as part of the trial group. The experience, for me, verified what I felt God “calling” me to do. So I jumped at the opportunity and never looked back.

There was one down side however. By joining ROTC, there was no lock on being assigned to the Chaplain Corps. In fact, the Army only started allowing cadets to apply for an educational delay for seminary three years ago (the year before I joined ROTC). The fact remained that I must complete my training without being assured a position in the Chaplain Corps until I received my accession packet back from the Army. Fortunately, I was one of nine cadets accessed Chaplain Corps. That time forced me to think about the ethics of my decision more so than anything else. It was at that that I realized many of my friends and myself could soon be experiencing the reality of what we were being trained to do. This meant above all else, most of us were on our way to a situation that may demand we take the lives of other human beings (no small matter). At this point, I committed myself to the military and resolved to do whatever they assigned me to whether that was the Chaplain Corps or Infantry. Trusting that the country I chose to serve would not completely abuse the utilities of its military might and that the great potential for the military to aid in global justice would move from the realm of potentiality to actuality. Also, as an individual it is always up to me to act ethically and responsibly as a soldier. As a responsible individual, I incur guilt by being associated with the Army for its injustices, but it is my hope that ultimately good comes from the decision I have made.¹

Analysis of Military Violence

Many who reject the idea that a Christian can in good conscience serve both God and country do so because of the nature of military service. To serve in the military is to embrace the reality of violence that comes with that choice to serve. Whether or not one who signs up for military service, in any capacity, likes or dislikes the violence of the

¹ See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, edited by Eberhard Bethge, translated by Neville Horton Smith, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 241. See also, Paul Tillich’s section on the “strange work of love” in *Love, Power, and Justice: Ontological Analyses and Ethical Applications*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 113-115.

military it is a reality of that individual's life from then on. The fact that some form of violence is inherent within every action of the military is unavoidable. To say otherwise neglects the reality of the M1A (tank) and the M4's (rifle weapon) not to mention numerous others. How then as a Christian can one choose to join an organization that seemingly counters the commandment of God that "thou shalt not kill" and Jesus teachings of pacifism?



² At this juncture I turn to Martin L. Cook, Elihu Root Professor of Ethics at the Army War College until 2003. Cook in "Soldiering," argues this particular issue from the vantage point of a "just war" scholar. Bringing the ideas of theologians such as Augustine and Luther to bear on the contemporary situation. Cook argues that America as a stabilizing force within the world could not be maintained without a powerful military that is used to enforce primarily our national interests but

also ideological goals. Therefore the military is necessary to ensure the stable life of the world that we live in today.

Cook follows by stating that:

The ability to threaten and to use coercive force is a morally necessary instrument of worldly power. We who benefit from the voluntary service of our fellow Christians (and others) who take on the moral, physical and spiritual burden of that service honor them poorly when we simply wish those sad necessities away.³

Meaning that simply because one wishes that the military did not exist, and should not exist, does not mean the military can cease existing. For the military to cease existing would be tragic to the delicate balance of our world today. So instead of looking down on those who serve in the military, those who do not should be thankful to those who do so that they do not for in several countries, (i.e. Korea) military service is demanded from its citizens.

In keeping with Cook, it is possible for the military to perform what Tillich referred to as the "strange work of love." If the military uses its might to further the reconciliation of people groups and promote the equality of human beings as human

² By PFC (Private First Class) Gul A. Alisan March 12, 2004. Col. Lyle Jackson administers de-worming medicine to a camel during civil-medical assistance mission in Jalabad Province, Afghanistan. Jackson is a veterinarian assigned to the 321st Civil Affairs Brigade. This photo appeared on www.army.mil.

This image expresses the ability of the military to be used to in a valuable humanitarian way that potentially effects positive change throughout the world.

³ Martin L. Cook, "Soldiering," *The Christian Century*, 118 no 20 July 4-11 2001, p 22-25.

beings then the military functions within the parameters of love. If however the military uses its might to simply facilitate the destruction of an opposing center of power without the hope of reconciliation or the goal of equality it does not act out of love. However, it is necessary for any supporter of military service in any capacity to see how the military may be used in way that facilitates love and justice in the world that we live in.⁴

Ultimately, the question belongs to the individual choosing for him/herself whether or not s/he can in fact serve in the military with good conscience. It is here that the responsible individual makes a choice, for better or worse. It is a choice that carries with it a number of issues and ethical concerns beyond simply the question itself. The moment one chooses to serve within the military one accepts the consequences of that action. That individual shares in the quilt and glory of the practices of the military before God and before others in the hopes that in some way reality is better for it. One stands before God with the knowledge that the deaths of many have been caused by the organization with which s/he is now aligned and that this organization is trained to kill and destroy. However, one also stands before God acknowledging that sometimes war is mandated by the reality in which we live and hopefully initial bloodshed may lead to peace in the end.⁵



⁴ Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice*, 113.

⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 117.

⁶ MAJ (Major) Wes Parker of the 486th Civil Affairs Battalion, greets a village Elder of Haji Aziz on 2 March 2004. The Civil Affairs group went to the village of Haji Aziz to give medical care and food assistance. (U.S. Army Photo by SGT Andre Reynolds) (Released) appeared on www.us.army.mil.

This particular image emphasizes the efforts our troops are making to coordinate peacekeeping in Iraq and establish friendly relations with the native peoples there.

Service as a Chaplain

What makes the role of the chaplain any different then from service in any other corps?



The simple answer to the question is that the chaplain is a minister within the military. This answer sums up what most people understand in a fairly adequate manner. Yet, there are several aspects of the chaplaincy that many people remain unaware.⁷ The chaplain, as chaplain, signifies religious freedom within the military even though each chaplain wears insignia relevant to his/her faith group. Chaplains are charged with the responsibility of ministering to all faith groups represented within the military to the best of their ability.⁸

Chaplains agree to act not simply as a minister of their respective faith group, but act as bearers of religious freedom and guardians of diversity for all soldiers. Herein lies one of the central goals of the Chaplain Corps and many chaplains currently serving. Further illustrating a commitment by the military to religious liberty, equality, and integration.

Another important role that chaplains occupy revolves around ethics. As a chaplain, one functions as the “heart,” or “soul,” of the military. That inner voice that holds the military accountable for its actions at peace and in war. The Chaplain Corps serves as a body that aids in formulating the ethical stances of the military in general, while the individual chaplain aids in practically maintaining those ethical standards within individual units. This particular role of a chaplain functions very much like that of a local pastor calling members to live by a certain ethical code (typically found in scripture, tradition, or experience depending on denomination) and calling them to repent when they stray. Chaplains likewise help the military find direction on a more ethical road than it might on its own.

It is impossible to discuss all the roles chaplains take on within the military but hopefully this gives an idea of the more central role of the chaplain.

Conclusion



Still, the question remains. How does a chaplain serve in good conscience both God and country?

Having said something of the different roles chaplains it is necessary to investigate the reality of Pro Deo et Patria (the slogan for the Chaplain Corps). Service as a chaplain holds in tension the reality of God and country, as well as peace and war. Many as necessary realities see the realities of both country and war as Cook pointed to. For the chaplain, hope remains that the state

⁷ Picture of Chaplain First Lieutenant Issac Opara. Picture appeared at <http://www.goarmy.com/chaplain/profiles/index.htm> along with an inspirational account of his experience at Chaplain Officer’s Basic Course that is of particular relevance.

⁸ See the appended Chaplain Candidate Statement form.

may produce relative peace through its ability to war and maintain a balance of powers. The chaplain remains committed to the ideal of peace and to God by seeing the state as a tool that, used properly, potentially effects positive change in the world. Therefore, participation in the military as a chaplain need not be held against one so inclined even given the morally ambiguous nature of the military as a whole.

Name
Address

Date

United States Army Recruiting Command
Chaplain Recruiting Branch
Attn: RCRO-SM-CH (Chaplain Candidate)
1307 Third Avenue
Fort Knox, KY 40121

To Whom It May Concern:

While remaining faithful to my denominational beliefs and practices, I understand that, as a chaplain candidate, I must be sensitive to religious pluralism and will provide for the free exercise of religion by military personnel, their families, and other authorized personnel served by the Army. I further understand that, while the Army places a high value on the rights of its members to observe the tenets of their respective religions, accommodation is based on military need and cannot be guaranteed at all times and in all places.

I understand that my appointment as a commissioned officer in the United States Army Reserve is being accomplished prior to completion of a required National Agency Check and a Federal Bureau of Investigation Name Check. I further understand that if as a result of the post-commissioning investigative processes, I am determined unacceptable for appointment as a commissioned officer, I will be discharged from the United States Army Reserve and that I will receive an appropriate discharge certificate.

Signature
Name
SSN