

The Impact of Religious Belief in the Theater of Operations

Lieutenant Commander Paul R. Wrigley,
Chaplain Corps, U.S. Naval Reserve

I look upon the spiritual life of the soldier as even more important than his equipment. . . . The soldier's heart, the soldier's spirit, the soldier's soul are everything. Unless the soldier's soul sustains him, he cannot be relied upon and will fail himself and his country in the end.

General George C. Marshall¹

WARS ARE NOT FOUGHT BY MACHINES; they are fought by people, affected by the intense emotions arising from combat. As Carl von Clausewitz acknowledged: "Military activity is never directed against material force alone; it is always aimed simultaneously at the moral forces which give it life, and the two cannot be separated."² For Clausewitz the term "moral" referred to the "sphere of mind and spirit," intangible attributes, the principal being "courage." While Clausewitz was not concerned specifically with the spiritual, religious belief is a moral force, one that should not be ignored in the theater of operations.³ Antoine-Henri Jomini's *The Art of War*, written with full awareness of earlier centuries of European religious strife, included the "propagation, crushing, or defending of religious theories" among "the reasons that states go to war"; Jomini considered such wars "above all the most deplorable."⁴

Chaplain Wrigley is currently assigned to the Chaplain Resource Board in Norfolk, Virginia. He graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1976 and earned his wings as a naval aviator in 1978. He flew A-6s with Attack Squadron 85 and was an instructor in Training Squadron 23. He left active duty in 1983 to attend Biblical Theological Seminary in Hatfield, Pennsylvania, reentering active service in 1989 as a chaplain. He served thereafter aboard USS *Horne* (CG 30) and as staff chaplain at Marine Corps Air Station, Cherry Point, North Carolina. He graduated with distinction from the Naval War College in 1995.

This article argues that although acknowledged by present doctrine, religious beliefs are considerably more important to military operations than is generally recognized. For example, the joint directive on staff estimates mentions religion only briefly and obliquely: “Consider social conditions, which run a wide range from the psychological ability of the populace to withstand the rigors of war to health and sanitation conditions in the area of operations. Language, social institutions and attitudes, and similar factors that may affect selection of a [course of action] must be considered.”⁵ The commander’s staff planners are to “describe language, religion, social institutions and attitudes, minority groups, population distribution, health and sanitation, and other related factors.”⁶ The publication then discusses the effects of the sociological situation in terms only of broad enemy capabilities and options for friendly forces; little guidance is given for analyzing religion’s impact on the theater of operations.

This outlook reflects the West’s downplaying of—even to the point of disregarding—the direct influence of religion on politics and war; it stems from a prevalent feeling that religion is a private, not a public, matter. That view is not held in other parts of the world, and such myopia can lead to misunderstanding. Religion and religious belief are powerful forces that have existed since the dawn of man. They are not limited to any one part of the world but touch the lives of men, women, and children around the globe. For many, religion is the true source of courage and strength. It can inspire and mobilize combatants and affect the outcome on the battlefield.

An operational commander, however well trained in the military issues, who is ignorant of or discounts the importance of religious belief can strengthen his enemy, offend his allies, alienate his own forces, and antagonize public opinion. Religious belief is a factor he must consider in evaluating the enemy’s intentions and capabilities, the state of his own forces, his relationships with allies, and his courses of action.

While religion is difficult to define, one general approach calls it “the acknowledgment of a higher, unseen power; an attitude of reverent dependence on that power in the conduct of life; and special actions, e.g., rites, prayers, and acts of mercy, as peculiar expressions and means of cultivation of the religious attitude.”⁷ On the grand scale, religion has the power to change the very fabric of society. It can shape the personal, political, economic, and cultural foundations of a people. The Christianization of the West and the rise of Islam are two examples of religious movements that wrought tremendous change in the world and continue to have a profound impact upon it. On the personal level, religion can alter individual lives. It has brought comfort and peace of mind to millions of men and women, providing a sense of meaning and

worth, and offering the key to understanding oneself and one's existence. Religious faith has enabled people to endure, even triumph over, personal hardship and tragedy.

Religion, Fundamentalism, and Nationalism

Precisely because religion is intensely personal, it can be a destabilizing social factor, especially when attempts are perceived to trivialize, control, or destroy it. It can mobilize some of the deepest passions in humanity; many people have been willing to die for their faith. Wars have been fought and atrocities committed in the name of religion. "Religion, in short, *matters* to people; it is real, and so is its influence on human personality. For some it is more real than the state. . . . [It] is more real, more alive, more vital than the good opinion of others. . . . The essence of religious martyrdom is the sacrifice that comes from the refusal to yield to what one's society demands. Anyone who believes deeply is a potential martyr, for belief always entails a bedrock principle that will not yield."⁸

Not surprisingly, then, many sources of conflict, even apparently secular nationalism, involve deep religious issues. Is the threat ultimately a religious movement (as exemplified by radical Islamic fundamentalism) or an ethnic demand for a separate government and flag? Fundamentalism and nationalism are often in a symbiotic relationship, too closely intertwined to be distinguishable. One analyst observes that "nationalism and fundamentalism are not separate problems. They are essentially identical. If their rhetoric differs, their causal impulses do not. Their psychological appeal to the masses is identical. Nationalism is simply secular fundamentalism. To the extent they differ at all, religious fundamentalism may even become the preferable disease from the US standpoint. In any case, these are *twin* enemies. And we are going to have to struggle with them, on many fields, for a very long time to come."⁹

Certainly, from the commander's viewpoint, nationalism and fundamentalism do share many elements.¹⁰ Deciding which is which, and accordingly who is likely to do what, is frequently complicated thereby. In any case, nationalists and fundamentalists can be difficult to deal with, whether as enemies or allies. They are often hostile toward cultural change and view other peoples—particularly those of the West—with suspicion. They consider their ideas the only important ones; other opinions do not really count. Their actions may seem irrational, and their views on human rights, especially concerning the treatment of prisoners and civilians, may differ drastically from those of Western military commanders. Atrocities such as massacres can "occur because powerful ideological forces—be they fascism, nationalism, or religious fundamentalism—can produce deep-seated hatred between states."¹¹

Religious Belief and the Commander's Estimate

Clearly the commander's task will not be easy; the world remains a dangerous place, even with the end of the Cold War. Commanders will face both combat and military operations other than war, and religion can play a critical role in either. What aspects of religious belief, then, should the commander consider in planning for theater operations?

In preparing his estimate of the situation, the commander is to "determine and analyze those factors that will influence the choice of a [course of action] as well as those that affect the capabilities of the enemy."¹² Several general areas of concern about this topic should be examined: religions present in the region, clergy, religious beliefs, modes of worship, the role of religion in the motivation of indigenous people, its effect on transcultural communication and that of socioeconomic factors on religion, relations of religious communities with government, and the influence of religious schools. Planners should also note principal faith symbols and the significance of sacred shrines, temples, and holy places.¹³

In general, commanders need to examine the religious factors involved on all sides and predict how they might influence the enemy, allies (and thus the coalition), their own troops, and public opinion at home and around the world. Reactions among any of these to decisions related to religious belief can seriously impede operations in the theater; a commander sensitive to the issue can at least minimize if not preclude problems.

Effects upon the Enemy. Among the issues that should be examined is the relationship between religious leaders and the government of the adversary state. Is the government secular or dominated by clerics? If the latter, are they fundamentalists? If secular, are there strong religious forces at work within the country? If so, what is the political manifestation? (For instance, in several nations Muslims are at odds with their governments, seeing themselves as true believers and considering it "blasphemous and unnatural" to be ruled by "misbelievers."¹⁴ Also, Islamic fundamentalism in general offers "unswerving opposition to the West" and rejects "any Western influence or presence in the lands of Islam."¹⁵) Are there sacred shrines, temples, or holy places, the damaging of which could be portrayed as desecration and would increase the resistance of the enemy? How might the enemy use religion as a propaganda tool to inspire his own forces or to erode his opponent's will to fight?

Effects upon Allies. The commander also needs to consider how religion affects relationships with his allies. He should be sensitive to religious issues that might offend his allies or be used as propaganda by the enemy. Joint doctrine

recognizes that “each partner in multinational operations possesses a unique cultural identity—the result of language, values, religious systems, and economic and social outlooks. Even seemingly minor differences, such as dietary restrictions, can have great impact. Commanders should strive to accommodate religious holidays, prayer calls, and other unique cultural traditions important to allies and coalition members, consistent with the situation.”¹⁶ Even minor differences can have great impact. For example, during Operation PROVIDE COMFORT in April 1991 the United States air-dropped military “Meals Ready to Eat” containing pork to starving Kurdish Muslims, who complained about being given food that violated their religious dietary restrictions.¹⁷

There can be more serious repercussions; for instance, as Israel learned the hard way, potential allies can be turned into enemies. During the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, in a remarkable event, “smiling Shiites” welcomed Israeli soldiers and tossed flowers to them. The Shiites praised the Israelis “for their deliverance” from the Palestine Liberation Organization. But perceived Israeli arrogance soon turned the liberation into what seemed an occupation. “No other facet of Israel’s gross misadventure in Lebanon,” notes one commentator, “presents a clearer case of bad judgment and self-defeating policy than Israel’s mishandling of the Shiite population of south Lebanon that turned a confederate against the Palestinians into a formidable adversary of the State of Israel.”¹⁸ In the event, many Shiites turned to Iran, Islamic fundamentalism, and Hezbollah, the Party of God.

Effects upon Own Forces. The commander also needs to be concerned with the impact of religious belief upon his own forces. He is responsible for the religious, spiritual, moral, and ethical well-being of those within his command. As soldiers approach combat, their anxiety over their safety and their interest in spiritual matters increase. The commander who develops a strong plan for combat religious ministry will increase the morale and combat effectiveness of his unit.

Captain Kevin Smith notes that “a unit’s true fighting power is a constantly changing combination of both psychological/moral force . . . and the purely mathematical possibilities of weapons effects.” The concept of maneuver—the central element of modern, joint U.S. combat doctrine—seeks to create disruption not so much by what is happening at the moment as by causing mental apprehension, doubt, and fear as to what might come *next*. When this happens—and it can happen to either side—a unit’s “morale envelope” is said to be threatened. The size of that “envelope” fluctuates and depends upon many variables; in Smith’s model, a unit with a large “morale envelope” is likely to hold and fight longer than a unit with a smaller one. Smith notes, “The notion of violating a [morale envelope] through maneuver—and then disrupting the en-

emy's morale—applies throughout the entire warfighting spectrum. We must keep in mind that it can happen to us as easily as to the enemy.”¹⁹

“Moral force,” as Smith uses the term, is usually understood as “the courage, daring, and combativeness of a body of troops” and is often presumed in the West to have nothing to do with religious or ethical standards.²⁰ But religious belief can have a tremendous impact upon it. Spiritual resources can provide strength, inner peace, security, and a sense of tranquility to the soldier, thereby increasing the moral force of the unit. Here a chaplain is invaluable; he provides the spiritual resources that enable soldiers to strengthen their faith and thus the moral courage crucial for survival in combat. One battalion commander has said, “Combat veterans know full well the positive influence a chaplain has on unit morale, and few at any level would go into combat again without one.”²¹

Effect upon Public Opinion. Finally, interest in spiritual matters also increases domestically as friends and family members in the military face potential combat. The public is concerned about anything that threatens loved ones. The commander must be sensitive to any decisions that will be perceived as inhibiting the fundamental right to worship or violating religious codes or freedoms. Such actions can arouse public opinion and erode support.

Religion, then, is a powerful force that touches the lives of countless people throughout the world. It is intensely personal and can mobilize its adherents to endure great hardship for the sake of a divine goal. Religion's role in the theater of operations is often underestimated, because of underestimation of religion's influence on politics and war, and it is hard to quantify, due to varying individual cultural backgrounds. Wise operational commanders will attempt to identify its impact upon their enemies, their allies, their own forces, and the public.

The importance of religion to fundamental aspects of military operations is fresh in mind from recent experience. A number of episodes from American military history also demonstrate why commanders should incorporate religious factors into their planning. Let us examine four disparate U.S. military operations in this light.

Desert Shield and Storm

Of all the matters that concerned General Norman Schwarzkopf leading up to and during the Gulf war, “the touchiest issues almost always involved religion.”²² They affected “everything from building the international political coalition to the role of the Israelis to individual religious practices.”²³ Religion was a topic of debate in the theater of operations, across the United States, and

throughout the world. In Saudi Arabia, as will be discussed, restrictions on public worship and the “chaplain” issues became media events.

Iraqi Manipulation. Saddam Hussein tried to use religion to fracture the coalition by driving a wedge between its Islamic members and the others. A radio station in Yemen, which was sympathetic to Baghdad, broadcast an interview with a man who deplored the “defilement” of the Muslim holy cities; he claimed that a U.S. tank had damaged his car in Mecca and that an American military checkpoint controlled access to the holy sites.²⁴ Iraq also tried to split the coalition by drawing Israel into the war; the Scud missile attacks on that nation were designed to elicit an Israeli military response against Iraq. A less well known Iraqi effort was an attempt to create a rift between the government and the people of Saudi Arabia by exploiting tension between the monarch and Islamic fundamentalists. King Fahd is the custodian of the two holiest sites in the Muslim world, the shrines at Mecca and Medina. Hussein accused Fahd of desecrating the holy sites by allowing American unbelievers to enter. The accusation was taken up by Iraq’s allies, including Jordan.²⁵

Saddam Hussein attempted to gain a military edge by using religion to rally the Iraqi people. Hussein declared that “in a war there will be many losses. God is on our side. That is why we will beat the aggressor.”²⁶ Conversely, he also took advantage of the coalition’s care not to damage mosques, holy places, archaeological sites, and the like, by stationing combat assets near them.²⁷

Interactions with Saudi Arabia. The conduct of non-Islamic worship in Saudi Arabia was a difficult issue for the coalition. Under the Koran, Islamic law prohibits any faith group other than Muslim from practicing its religion in that nation. There was, therefore, concern about the reaction of Islamic fundamentalists in Saudi Arabia. One prominent theologian who opposed the U.S. presence declared that the “practice of foreign faiths on our sacred soil gives offense to Islam. The transgressions of Saddam are merely the excuse America is using to spread the disease of imperialism.”²⁸ The Saudis were so anxious in this respect that King Fahd even brought in Islamic scholars to “verify the sanctity of the mosques.”²⁹

The presence of Jewish service members and chaplains was a particularly sensitive matter. An article about the celebration of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year, in Saudi Arabia caused Prince Khalid to complain to General Schwarzkopf, “You have brought a rabbi into this country who is saying that for the first time in history, the ram’s horn will be blown on Islamic soil!”³⁰ Schwarzkopf summoned the newly arrived Central Command (CentCom) chaplain, Colonel David Peterson, and told him, “You have the King on the ceiling! There are three things that can cause this whole coalition effort to come

unraveled and you have one of them! Now you get out there and you keep your chaplains under control. And you make sure that all my troops have the opportunity to practice their faith.”³¹

Therein was the dilemma: the coalition needed to provide for the religious expression of U.S. forces without offending the Saudis. A number of controversial policies were implemented in an attempt to deal with the problem. General Schwarzkopf called together his chaplains to provide them guidance. Those in the cities were “to take the Christian or Jewish insignia off your uniforms, or to wear them in such a way that they can’t be seen.” (Chaplains in the field would not be affected by that requirement.) He was also concerned about religious services: “We won’t advertise them, publicize them, or let them be filmed—we don’t want them broadcast on TV for the whole Moslem world to see.” General Schwarzkopf expected resistance from the chaplains, especially on the issue of insignia, and was surprised therefore when the chaplains “readily agreed, and even went a step further: they started calling themselves ‘morale officers.’” (The Air Force had used the term “morale officer” to refer to its chaplains in Saudi Arabia even before Desert Shield. The U.S. European Command had also adopted it. From there, “morale officer” found its way into the CentCom policy.)³² These guidelines were codified in a directive promulgated on 12 September 1990.

That directive placed restrictions on the display of faith-specific religious symbols (including flags and pennants), use of religious articles, distribution of religious materials, media coverage of religious services, and accessibility to chaplains by the media. Worship services were to be called “fellowship groups” and were not to be conducted “in open areas or in the view of Host Nationals.” Information concerning these services was to be “disseminated verbally or through intra-unit correspondence . . . to prevent inviting unwanted attention to religious services.”³³ However well intended, many of these strictures had a negative effect upon the American forces and public opinion in the United States.³⁴

There were, on the other hand, examples of cooperation between U.S. forces and the Saudis. The CentCom chaplain, on his own initiative, met regularly with the Saudi Arabian Army’s Religious Affairs Department. He explained how chaplains and their assistants provided religious support to U.S. soldiers. Chaplain Peterson made arrangements for American Muslim soldiers to worship in local mosques and to participate in an *Umran*, a pilgrimage to Mecca. The Saudis understood the American desire to worship; they just wanted it done discreetly.

Religion was also a factor in planning the offensive against Iraqi forces. In late October 1990, coalition military leaders discussed timing, and General Schwarzkopf was told “that the window of opportunity for an attack would

slam shut in March, when Ramadan, the Moslem holy month, began”; the coalition would need to define its goals quickly and begin its offensive soon.³⁵ Fasting during the month of Ramadan is one of the five pillars of the Muslim faith, and its importance to Islamic allies could not be ignored.

During the ground offensive, an unexpected challenge arose when large numbers of Iraqis were captured. Between 5 and 20 percent of the Iraqi enemy prisoners of war (EPWs) claimed to be Christian. Numerous Iraqi EPWs requested the opportunity to see Christian chaplains; special tents were set up for Iraqi Christians to worship, and Arabic New Testaments were provided. The Saudis were reluctant and unprepared to provide religious support for EPWs until the CentCom chaplain reminded them of Geneva Convention requirements to do so.³⁶

Impact upon U.S. Forces. Despite the claims in his autobiography, General Schwarzkopf was not entirely successful in his policy of restricting the display of symbols and calling chaplains “morale officers”—it had a negative impact and caused resentment within Central Command.³⁷ The *New York Times* reported that “the rules have disturbed some American soldiers and sailors, who say they resent that any prohibitions have been put on their religious freedom, especially in a country that they are now being asked to defend with their lives.”³⁸ One soldier said, “I’m not a troublemaker, and I don’t want to offend Moslems or anyone else. It just seems wrong to me that Americans who have come to defend the Arabs should be asked to sacrifice our traditions and beliefs.”³⁹

The issues were hotly debated in the theater of operations and in the United States. The senior Marine chaplain present voiced his frustration to the CentCom chaplain: “I was not sent here to be a P[rotestant]-Morale Officer. My denomination did not educate me to be a P-Morale Officer. And the Chaplain Corps didn’t ordain me to be a P-Morale Officer. And I was not sent over here to be the senior Marine P-Morale chaplain in country. I am who I am and these Marines are who they are and they’ve been sent here and they’re going to die, perhaps, in this country to defend it to give them the right to be who they are. And I think we should have the right if we’re going to die, to die as who we are, Chaplain.”⁴⁰

The CentCom chaplain affirmed these misgivings. “Taking off branch insignia and referring to a chaplain as a ‘Morale Officer’ had a negative impact on the morale of service members, the American public and the Chaplains. In addition, it raised serious questions regarding U.S. Public Law.”⁴¹ There were further problems, as he was to observe later, with respect to “constitutional issues, the insignia being our way of identifying ourselves to our parishioners, and per-

sonal conviction.”⁴² The directive to call chaplains “morale officers” was officially revoked on 1 January 1991.

No chaplain had been assigned to the CentCom staff during the opening stages of Desert Shield, and until Colonel Peterson arrived the lack of a chaplain contributed greatly to confusion in religious policies for U.S. forces. Initially “some service members were not allowed to bring Bibles and religious symbols, [and] some were required to change their religious preference on ‘dog-tags.’” Contradictory directives were published, some in violation of church law of various denominations, and erroneous information was disseminated.⁴³ The results included negative media coverage and dissatisfaction among the troops and leaders of faith groups. The media reported, “It is not even clear whether there is a policy. Rumors and confusion abound on the subject. Some officers say the Pentagon has issued a flat order barring the open practice of religion. Others insist there is no such edict, only a general advisory that Saudi ‘sensitivities’ should be respected.”⁴⁴

Despite such initial problems, the ministry to U.S. forces thrived. Many sought and found the comfort that faith brings in the face of death. Attendance increased dramatically at worship services, Bible studies, prayer meetings, prayer breakfasts, and fellowship groups. Many were baptized, rededicated their lives to God, or became more active in their faith.

American Public Opinion. Letters from soldiers and media reports had wide influence. During Desert Shield, especially during the holidays in November and December, much was written about religious issues. Though media representatives were not allowed to talk to chaplains or cover worship services, many service members expressed their concern over the religious restrictions, and the media reported this to the American public. An editorial in the *Washington Post* commented on the “insignia” and “morale officer” issues and the restrictions on worship. It concluded, “All this bears careful watching. Saudi Arabia has its own culture, standards and strongly held religious beliefs, and it stands in a special place in the Moslem world. The United States does not seek to challenge any of this but must insist that Americans in the military be protected in the full exercise of their religions. That constitutional right travels with the troops and must be respected wherever they serve.”⁴⁵

The possibility existed that public support for Desert Shield and Storm might have eroded due to restrictions on worship and related resentment toward the Saudi government. The U.S. military had a difficult task explaining the policy and convincing the American public that its troops were still able to worship.

War with Mexico

An early example in American history of religious belief affecting the theater of operations was the war with Mexico from 1846 to 1848. This conflict had religious implications for both the United States and Mexico. American troops initially entered Mexico without any chaplains assigned to tactical units, even though “the war was seen by many as a crusade by Protestant America to subdue Catholic Mexico.”⁴⁶ This worked to the Americans’ disadvantage when the Mexican press, both secular and religious, tried to manipulate the religious sensitivities of both sides to degrade the effectiveness of the U.S. Army. Mexican propaganda portrayed the clash as a religious war, with the American objective being to “confiscate church property and destroy Catholicism.”⁴⁷ Herman A. Norton notes the Mexican purpose for the distortions: “First, to incite Mexicans to resist the American military as a matter of religious duty; and second, to disturb or upset Catholic soldiers in the American Army, even to the point of considering desertion.”⁴⁸

This propaganda alarmed President James K. Polk and his advisors, who recognized the danger in this conflict being portrayed as a religious war. They were concerned not only about the effect upon the Mexican population but also about how Catholics, who constituted one-fourth of the regular soldiers in the U.S. Army, would react. Polk, upon the advice of his secretary of state, James Buchanan, decided to send two Catholic priests as chaplains to General Zachary Taylor’s army. He reasoned that the appointment of the two priests would allay the fears of Catholic soldiers and civilians, while showing that “the government possessed no anti-Catholic bias and had no intention of destroying churches and warring on religion in Mexico.”⁴⁹ No Protestant chaplains were appointed to the Army, in order to emphasize that this was not a “Protestant crusade.”

After receiving Army commissions, Fathers John McElroy and Anthony Rey joined General Taylor near Matamoras, Mexico, on 6 July 1846. McElroy remained at the base hospital while Rey was assigned to the combat troops. In addition to his duties ministering to the sick and wounded, McElroy organized a school for the local Mexican children and taught there four hours a day. When Mass was offered to the American soldiers, McElroy also served Mexican civilians. He hoped that his actions would help counter Mexican propaganda about Americans.

Rey, meanwhile, served with distinction during the siege of Monterrey in September 1846 with his ministry to the wounded. Reports of his efforts even found their way into the American press, when letters home from soldiers at the front were published. In January 1847, Chaplain Rey and a companion were assassinated by Mexican guerrillas as they travelled to Matamoras. News of his

death shocked the local village; most of its inhabitants went out to recover the remains and bury them in the local cemetery.

In February 1847, Congress authorized the appointment of additional chaplains to Army tactical units in Mexico. This was due in part to the “impressive reports and letters sent by officers and soldiers commending the valuable service” of McElroy and Rey.⁵⁰

Vietnam

The Vietnam War is a more recent example of a conflict in which religious belief affected all the combatants. The Vietnamese culture was radically unfamiliar to most Americans. The Vietnamese do not distinguish between the “secular and sacred,” as many Westerners tend to do; a Vietnamese life is affected much more by religion than is the typical American’s. Robert L. Mole comments about the Vietnamese culture: “Just as life is composed of interwoven facts, just so do religious belief systems undergird and control their daily life to an amazing degree. Thus many Vietnamese unconsciously and culturally blend elements of Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity with animism into a way of life. The monistic Westerner reacts by rejecting philosophies that do not fit into his ‘frame of reference’ through a determination that if one concept is correct, the others must be wrong. The pluralistic Vietnamese adopt, adapt, and utilize acceptable elements within all the contrasting philosophical concepts without apparently or consciously sensing any inconsistency. This fundamental difference of viewpoints must be understood and appreciated if citizens of the two cultures are to build lasting friendship and effective rapport.”⁵¹

Further complicating matters was the ethnic mix of the South Vietnamese people. The ethnic Vietnamese dwelt in the lowlands, the plains in the valleys and the river deltas. The second major ethnic group lived in the mountains and highlands. Known as Montagnards, the group consisted of thirty-three tribes, each with distinct variations in “customs, mores, and religious beliefs which make it different from its neighbors.”⁵² The Montagnards made up only a small percentage of Vietnam’s total population, but they were of strategic importance because they were the “primary inhabitants of about 50 percent of Vietnam’s land area.”⁵³ This cultural and religious diversity posed an immense challenge to all combatants as they struggled to accomplish their military objectives.

The sensitive issue of religion was difficult for the communist forces in the South, because their reputation for anticlericalism stood in opposition to their public support of religious freedom. The National Liberation Front (NLF) tried to infiltrate, neutralize, or win over religious groups. Although it had some success, it was looked upon with suspicion by many, such as the Ong Ba, an indige-

nous peasant religion. Similarly, “Catholic memories of conflict with the [Communist] Party were too powerful to overcome.”⁵⁴ The anticommunist attitude of the Hrey tribe, a Montagnard ethnic group, was primarily due to religious differences. A May 1966 report traced this attitude “to 1954 when the communists attempted to put a stop to buffalo sacrifices,” which were a vital part of the Hrey animist religion. The Hrey had so resented this episode that they attacked the communists with crossbows and spears.⁵⁵

These difficulties did not prevent the communist forces from trying to use religious belief to their advantage. They studied the various religious beliefs in order to disrupt joint South Vietnamese–American efforts. The communists used the alliance ritual of the Cua, another Montagnard ethnic group, to discourage tribesmen from entering alliances against them. “While only a few Americans have been so ‘adopted,’ subversive agents have used the Cua adoption alliance to their good advantage. Since religious value systems and taboos in a spirit-controlled environment are involved, Cua tribesmen feel it impossible to break their pledge and fight once these alliances have been formed.”⁵⁶

The communists also used religious beliefs to wage psychological warfare against the local population. A U.S. Navy training manual explained, “Beliefs arising within Animism give rise to the demand that proper disposal of the dead be made to avoid creating a wandering spirit. It is the same religious concept that encourages the mutilation of corpses by the enemy. This has psychological impacts not fully appreciated by Americans.”⁵⁷ Village elders would often be kidnapped and threatened with decapitation if family members did not conform to communist wishes. Their families feared that decapitation “would separate that ancestor’s soul to wander aimlessly in the afterlife without ascending in the family order.”⁵⁸

By the same token, the South Vietnamese government had trouble dealing with the religious diversity within its borders. In 1955, Ngo Dinh Diem turned against two religious sects, the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao, as he consolidated power and eventually proclaimed himself president of the new government. His regime and those that followed it lacked legitimacy because they were seen by the peasants as a continuation of French colonial rule. “South Vietnam’s urban elite possessed the outward manifestations of a foreign culture and often professed an alien faith.”⁵⁹ The composition of the military leadership mirrored this weakness of the government. “Concerning South Vietnamese leadership, there was a real difference between officers and men. The officers were urban, spoke French, and were often Catholic. The soldiers were rural Buddhists.”⁶⁰

Diem further alienated much of the rural population through village relocation. In 1962 he launched the Strategic Hamlet Program, designed to concentrate the rural population in villages protected against the communist forces. It was also hoped that this would be an effective tool to cut off the NLF from local

support. The program was resented by many peasants who for religious and economic reasons did not want to leave their homes and land. The Ong Ba, like other groups, stressed “ancestor worship and the veneration of grave sites, and removing the family from their ancestors was therefore a blasphemous act.”⁶¹

The downfall of Diem’s government was caused, in part, by his inability to handle protests of the Buddhist community. On 8 May 1963, nine people were killed in a demonstration at Hue. Buddhist monks then shocked the world by burning themselves in protest against the Diem government. On 21 August the government raided twelve Buddhist temples and arrested over 1,400 Buddhists. On 1 November, Diem was killed and his government overthrown, with tacit American approval.⁶² Only the Catholic Vietnamese community mourned Diem’s death.

The problems of religious diversity facing the South Vietnamese government confronted U.S. forces as well. South Vietnamese policy decisions, coupled with a “strange” culture, proved difficult obstacles for the American military. This was highlighted in March 1965 during a Marine Corps training exercise, Operation SILVER LANCE. This evolution simulated problems that could arise when military members were not aware of the religious and value systems a foreign society embraced. “This exercise demonstrated that such a lack of information can create alienation of local peoples, a decrease in security, and a potential increase in casualties.”⁶³ The arrival of Marine combat units in March 1965 also emphasized a need for a more comprehensive indoctrination program. “It became readily apparent that an extensive program of lectures and discussions on the influence of Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and other indigenous religions on the life of the people was necessary.”⁶⁴

As a result of SILVER LANCE, the Southeast Asia Religious Project was established, in which a Navy chaplain was directed to study beliefs, customs, and religious practices. Chaplain Robert L. Mole was assigned from August 1965 to July 1966 to collect and prepare “materials suitable for use in orienting Navy and Marine Corps personnel in Vietnam.”⁶⁵ The fruit of this research was to be shared with the other services as well.

Much of what was learned was relayed to American service members. New arrivals to III Marine Amphibious Force received two lectures, “Religions of Vietnam” and “Religiously Based Customs of Vietnam.” Numerous publications about Vietnamese religions and culture were printed. One of them, NAVPERS 15991, provided “Guidelines for Understanding” for military personnel: “Do Treat Temples, Spirit Houses, Sacred Places Carefully” and “Don’t Tamper With Sacred Objects Without Direct Orders” were two important points arising from Vietnamese ancestor worship and fear of angering the spirits. Americans were told not to remove “spirit poles,” which, “like the dese-

cratation of graves and molestation of spirit houses, can create potentially dangerous antagonism among those who might otherwise be our friends.”⁶⁶

Americans were also reminded that their own culture was as strange to the Vietnamese as theirs was to the Americans: “*Remember That Cultural Differences May Bewilder Both Vietnamese And Americans*. . . . American culture is often perceived as active, material, and logical, while that of the Vietnamese is primarily passive, spiritual, and mystical.”⁶⁷ How effective the services were in teaching their people about Vietnamese culture is open to debate. Bergerud notes that “for reasons not at all apparent in retrospect, the army did almost nothing to prepare soldiers for the ‘culture shock’ (and the term is a good one) that all of them encountered when coming to Vietnam. Almost all of the veterans . . . stressed how totally ignorant they were about the Vietnamese and their culture. They were also unprepared for the poverty of Vietnam. Initial reactions were usually a mixture of curiosity and disgust.”⁶⁸ New arrivals were indoctrinated on Vietnamese culture. For whatever reason, this indoctrination seems to have been ineffective. The lessons of SILVER LANCE were confirmed: American ignorance or indifference did indeed alienate the Vietnamese, decrease security, and increase casualties.

Military Operations Other Than War

U.S. military commanders must concern themselves today with operations not principally involving combat. Many will prominently feature religious practices and requirements. As an illustration of such concerns, let us examine a recent case of considerable duration and media interest.

Operation GTMO was the American response to the large number of refugees fleeing Haiti, in which refugees were placed in camps at the U.S. naval station at Guantanamo Bay (known for decades to servicemen as “GTMO,” or “Gitmo”), Cuba. Chaplains played a vital role. The Joint Task Force (JTF) Commander, Brigadier General Kenneth W. Simpson, U.S. Army, was convinced that chaplains and their assistants were integral to the mission. He asked for additional chaplains and assistants to support the 12,500 Haitians and 1,500 U.S. military and civilian personnel.⁶⁹ He considered them important because of “the significance of the spiritual dimension of the Haitian culture.”⁷⁰

Chaplains proved crucial in providing support to the Haitians. They conducted a minimum of two worship services and one Bible study per day, per camp. Worship services tended to be long and well attended, providing a constructive outlet for people of faith with little else to do. Chaplains also performed a number of other functions in the camps: they facilitated communications; clarified rumors; explained American civilian control and processing procedures; distributed clothing, Bibles, and religious literature; as-

sisted in reuniting families; taught English as a second language; and counselled.

Chaplains also served as liaisons between the refugees and U.S. military and civilian officials. In general, because of their own experience, Haitians feared the military; but they considered the chaplains, as clergymen, trustworthy. The JTF Command Chaplain reported to General Simpson that “chaplains continue to have a significant impact on the character of the migrant camps. Many sources reported that on several occasions chaplains have facilitated two way communications during demonstrations, helped defuse tense situations and assisted in restoring calm during disturbances. Their role as religious leaders gives them credibility and status with the Haitian migrant community. They are viewed as reliable, objective sources of information and as peacemakers.”⁷¹ The role of chaplains as peacemakers was an important one. The JTF Command Chaplain reported later that “due to continued disruptions and rock throwing incidents in some camps, the [Armed Forces] Commander has asked for additional chaplain support and presence in the camps.”⁷² Chaplains also attended “town meetings” to listen to the refugees’ concerns.

Chaplains were placed on Coast Guard cutters, where they did “double duty.” They accompanied the Haitians who were being repatriated to Port-au-Prince, counseling the refugees facing this disappointing and difficult transition. The chaplains also provided a ministry to the crews of the cutters. The JTF Command Chaplain noted that “the JTF Chaplain and Coast Guard Chaplain (Commander) Bob Adair met with cutter captains and staff to coordinate religious coverage. Their concern was not only chaplains assisting the management of migrants but expanded to include concerns for the welfare of their crews. Perhaps due to the stress and lengthy tours of duty there has recently been more than one suicide attempted.”⁷³

Direct support to military personnel was also an important part of the JTF chaplains’ duties. A full chapel program and chaplain services were provided to service members. Chaplains also helped military personnel deal with the stress of Operation GTMO, gave Haitian cultural instruction to new arrivals, and “return/reunion” briefs to department personnel. The JTF Chaplain also advised the commander on morale trends, food problems, potential points of tension, and what was working well in the camps.⁷⁴

These examples have been offered to elaborate and underscore the truth of the opening words of a recent Joint Publication: “Religion plays a pivotal role in the self-understanding of many people and has a significant effect on the goals, objectives, and structure of society. In some cases, religious self-understanding may play a determinative or regulating role on policy, strategy, or tactics. It is important for the joint force commander (JFC) to have an

understanding of the religious groups and movements within the theater and the potential impact that they may have on the accomplishment of the assigned mission.”⁷⁵

Touching the lives of countless people throughout the world, religion can be both intensely personal and notably political, its effects extending from individual motivation to national or group goals, strategies, and decisions. While the role of religion is difficult to quantify, the wise commander will carefully study its effects on military operations.

Notes

1. George C. Marshall, quoted in Donald W. Shea, “A Ministry in the Eye of the Storm,” *Army*, September 1991, p. 54.
2. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984), p. 137.
3. *Ibid.*
4. See Antoine-Henri de Jomini, *The Art of War* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977), chap. 1 and art. 9, pp. 12, 31.
5. U.S. Defense Dept., *Joint Operation Planning and Execution System*, Joint Pub 5-03.1 (Washington: Joint Staff, 4 August 1993), p. P-6-2.
6. *Ibid.*, p. P-3-4.
7. Walter A. Ewell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1984), p. 931.
8. Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), pp. 41–2. (Emphasis original.)
9. Ralph Peters, “Vanity and the Bonfire of the `isms,”” *Parameters*, Autumn 1993, pp. 40–1. Peters argues, for instance, that in the Balkans the political and religious elements are almost inseparable. (Emphasis original.)
10. For a detailed discussion, see *ibid.*, p. 43.
11. John J. Mearsheimer, “Disorder Restored,” *Rethinking America’s Security: Beyond Cold War to New World Order*, eds. Graham Allison and Gregory F. Treverton (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), p. 221.
12. *Joint Operation Planning and Execution System: Vol. 1, Planning Policies and Procedures*, Joint Pub 5-03.1 (Washington: Joint Staff, 4 August 1993), p. P-6-1.
13. U.S. Army Dept., *Religious Support Doctrine*, FM 16-1 (Washington: November 1989).
14. Bernard Lewis, “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 1990, p. 54.
15. David Wurmser, “The Rise and Fall of the Arab World,” *Strategic Review*, Summer 1993, p. 35.
16. U.S. Defense Dept., *Doctrine for Joint Operations*, Joint Pub 3-0 (Washington: Joint Staff, 1 February 1995), p. VI-4. (Emphasis omitted.)
17. Telephone conversation with Capt E. F. Blancett, CHC, USN, U.S. European Command, 25 January 1995.
18. Sandra Mackey, *Lebanon: Death of a Nation* (New York: Congdon and Weed, 1989), p. 204.
19. Kevin B. Smith, “Moral Disruption by Maneuver,” *U.S. Army Aviation Digest*, March/April 1990, pp. 2–10.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 3, footnote 1.
21. Cole C. Kingseed (Lt. Col., USA), “The Battalion Chaplain,” *Infantry*, July-August 1991, p. 16.
22. H. Norman Schwarzkopf with Peter Petre, *It Doesn’t Take a Hero* (New York: Bantam, 1993), p. 388.
23. Shea, p. 54.
24. Susan Sachs, “A Christmas under Wraps: Troops Religious Rites Are Muffled to Not Offend Muslim Hosts,” *Newsday*, 23 December 1990, p. 17.
25. Patrick J. Sloyan, “U.S. Troops Avoid Moslem Wrath; Saudis Fear Defiling of Holy Sites,” *Newsday*, 4 October 1990, p. 13.
26. “Hussein Vows to Miss Deadline,” *New York Times*, 22 December 1990, p. 7.
27. For coalition targeting policies, see U.S. Dept. of Defense, *Conduct of the Persian Gulf War: Final Report to Congress* (Washington: 1992), pp. 132–3.

28. Colin Nickerson, "GIs in Desert Follow Faith in Furtive Way," *The Boston Globe*, 12 December 1990, p. 1.
29. Sloyan, p. 13.
30. Schwarzkopf, p. 388.
31. Telephone conversation with Chaplain David Peterson (Col., USA), Forces Command Chaplain, Fort McPherson, Ga., 3 February 1995. Chaplain Peterson served as CentCom Chaplain during Desert Shield and Storm.
32. Schwarzkopf, p. 389; Peterson, 3 February 1995.
33. USCINCENT message, date-time group 121957Z September 1990, "Command Policy for the Administration of Religious Support Operation Desert Shield" [Unclassified].
34. Peterson, 3 February 1995; Editorial, "Religion and Desert Shield," *Washington Post*, 11 November 1990, p. A30; Philip Shenon, "Standoff in the Gulf: Out of Saudi View, U.S. Force Allows Religious Their Rites," *New York Times*, 22 December 1990, p. 1; and Nickerson, p. 1.
35. Schwarzkopf, p. 430.
36. Chaplain David Peterson (Col., USA), "After Action Report: Operation Desert Storm," briefing to the Armed Forces Chaplain Board, Washington, D.C., summer 1991.
37. Schwarzkopf, p. 389.
38. Shenon, p. 1.
39. Nickerson, p. 1.
40. Oral history of Captain Tom Hiers, CHC, USN, Chaplain Resource Board, Norfolk, Va., 11 January 1995. "Marine chaplains" are in fact naval officers of the Chaplain Corps (CHC) assigned to Marine units.
41. Peterson, briefing.
42. Peterson, 3 February 1995; "Religion and Desert Shield"; Shenon, p. 1; and Nickerson, p. 1.
43. Peterson, briefing.
44. Nickerson, p. 1.
45. "Religion and Desert Shield."
46. Herman A. Norton, *Struggling for Recognition: The United States Army Chaplaincy, 1791–1865* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Chaplains, Dept. of the Army, 1977), pp. 64–5.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
48. *Ibid.*
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
51. Robert L. Mole (Cdr., CHC, USN), "A Brief Survey of the Phat-Giao Hoa-Hao of Vietnam," Southeast Asia Religious Project, 1969, p. xii.
52. Robert L. Mole (Cdr., CHC, USN), *Peoples of Tribes of South Vietnam* (Saigon: COMNAV SUPPACT Saigon, Summer 1968), p. 7.
53. *Ibid.*
54. Eric M. Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1991), pp. 52, 66.
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56. Mole, *Peoples of Tribes of South Vietnam*, pp. 186–7.
57. U.S. Navy Dept., *The Religion of South Vietnam in Faith and Fact*, NAVPERS 15991 (Washington: Jim E. Fulbrook (Capt., MSC, USA), "LAMSON 719, Part I: Prelude to Air Assault," *U.S. Army Aviation Digest*, June 1986, p. 11.
58. Bergerud, p. 3.
59. Richard O'Hare, quoted in Bergerud, p. 230.
60. Bergerud, p. 52.
61. Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 26–7.
62. NAVPERS 15991, p. v.
63. Herbert L. Bergsma (Cdr., CHC, USN), *Chaplains with Marines in Vietnam, 1962–1971* (Washington: Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 1985), p. 100.
64. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
65. NAVPERS 15991, pp. 91–7.
66. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
67. Bergerud, p. 170.
68. U.S. Atlantic Fleet memorandum 1331 serial N02C of 18 May 1992.
69. *Ibid.*
70. CJTF GTMO memorandum serial JTF-CH of 10 June 1992.
71. CJTF GTMO memorandum serial JTF-CH of 17 June 1992.
72. *Ibid.*
73. U.S. Atlantic Fleet memorandum 1331 serial N02C of 18 May 1992.
74. U.S. Dept. of Defense, *Religious Ministry Support for Joint Operations*, Joint Pub 1-05 (Washington: Joint Staff, 3 August 1993), p. I-1.