

Essay: The Military Chaplaincy and Prostitution

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I wrote this in early 2004 and got some feed back from Chaplains around the country. Most of their comments and questions were focused entirely on my brief mention of the open prostitution available to American troops in An Khe, Vietnam. Chaplains forced the closure of "Sin City" in late 1968. I'm told via email that the military now denies it ever existed. In Pleiku where open prostitution was unavailable, many soldiers were incapacitated by multiple strains of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). I recall a unit of company size where over 30% of the soldiers were unable to report for duty one day because of the severity of symptoms related to STDs.

The Military Chaplaincy and Prostitution

Modern warfare is predominantly about "collateral damage" i.e., the destruction of vital infrastructure and slaughter of the innocent. Defenseless civilians comprised 60% of the casualties in WWII and that ratio has now jumped to 80% or more. What truly religious institution or person would want to legitimate that, unwittingly or otherwise? The following reflections are meant to enlighten and promote change, not to dispense blame. I always assume it's a lack of wholeness (semi-consciousness-insanity), that leads us to serve violence, not evil intent. When fully conscious we choose, instead, nonviolent means which alone make a world-community of "otherness" possible. But finding our way toward the better requires a close look at the worst. Long repeating patterns of insanity attain the appearance of normalcy. One further note: I can personally attest that some of those involved with military Chaplaincy are people of integrity. Perhaps they'll step forward and help initiate a radical change.

I recall from Vietnam, circa 1968, that prostitution was a primary concern of the Chaplaincy while the daily slaughter of unarmed civilians was not. Some Chaplains prayed for the successful fire bombings of thatched roofed villages and supplied rationalizations proffered as "justifications" for committing crimes against humanity. They provided a morale boost to soldiers who might otherwise react "negatively" (i.e., in a humane way rendering them "unfit") to missions requiring the burning and shooting of women and children. Chaplains did not expose nor did they pursue loudly and publicly the ethical implications of the massacres at My Lai and elsewhere throughout Vietnam, nor did they speak up for reparations or offer so much as an apology to survivors. The survivors lived in poverty for decades until a Madison, Wisconsin Quaker group came to the rescue. Working with that group's field managers Mike Boehm and Phan Van Do was the highlight of my return trip to Vietnam. Holding the hands of some of the My Lai survivors was an intense and unforgettable experience.

On the other hand, the Chaplaincy's loud protestations did put an end to open prostitution in An Khe. But the killing and poisoning with agent orange continued for another five years. The result was over 600,000 civilians killed and 2,000,000 more maimed by agent orange. Although Chaplains weren't shamelessly hawking the war

like Cardinal Spellman, Billy Graham and others, they nonetheless contributed to its continuation. The headlines surrounding the closing of "Sin City" bolstered the false impression that morality and justice are part of the fabric of our military at war. In effect they spit-shined that indispensable but false military image.

Abetting mass murder and massive environmental destruction flies in the face of sanity and wisdom and mocks the core tenets of all wisdom traditions. In order to serve the military, the Golden Rule must be warped into: do unto them before they do unto you; and the related tenet, better to be killed than to kill, gets reversed. Given the totally interconnected web of life and consciousness, what we do to the "other" we do to ourselves. Killing and destroying for peace is especially absurd in the light of wisdom because, as Gandhi noted: "means and ends are like seed and tree respectively". Therefore, our progression from the world- "war to end wars" to our present world-war without end, is not surprising at all - violence in, violence out. It would be surprising had it turned out otherwise.

The above recollections go back over 30 years but it seems little has changed. The Chaplaincy continues to be a major cog in the military death machine. How would today's military fare without its Mythico-religious cloak of legitimation? How would today's poor and half educated soldiers fare without the comforting assurances Chaplains offer, especially regarding their sacrifice? For the "good" soldier there'll be "pie in the sky when you die." Much of the rhetoric I'm hearing was used in the past to "justify" Black slavery, the subjugation of women, the ethnic cleansing of Indians, and so on into the present. We're getting slicker, Madison Avenue versions of the same old bull. The Bush regime wants us to believe that for their "noble cause" of ridding the world of evil - the end will justify any means used. That was also Hitler's belief. In reality there is no flag large enough to cover the shame of killing so many innocent people. The destruction of vital infrastructure will kill and cripple many more.

Chaplains along with Mr. Bush ought to reflect on the fact that his hero, Jesus, and those like Paul who carried the spirit of his teachings, did not offer legitimation to militarists nor offer pabulum to those who followed their orders. Instead, they taught and modeled active non-violence like that used effectively in the civil rights and women's liberation movements and also to topple oppressive regimes. Up until the 4th century when the Catholic church sold out to the Emperor Constantine, the Jesus movement steadfastly refused to support or legitimate any military actions including defensive preparations.

Considering the Chaplaincy's inordinate focus on prostitution, one might argue that the sins of the sex trade are minor compared to the Chaplaincy's prostitution of religious authority (unwittingly or otherwise) in support of the military. It's time to end the military Chaplaincy's present role and reserve spiritual comfort and encouragement for the victims of military violence and for those who refuse to be the instruments of violence. It's time to emulate religious leaders like M. L. King Jr. and speak truth to power, both religious and secular. It's time to promote only non-violent means - "the force more powerful" and to get back in tune with sanity, humanity, and the rest of the world.

The new Chaplaincy could promote a Department of Peace and a real peace force comprised of those courageous enough to employ non-violent means in service to world community instead of empire. They could do counter recruiting in schools and actively promote conscientious objection. They could challenge "just war" theory - easily, given that 80% of the slaughtered are defenseless civilians. Instead of promoting, they could be exposing military propaganda. Instead of promoting, they could be exposing the lies told in order to sucker young people into the poverty draft. They could counter the cynical appeals for sacrifice and heroism called for by leaders who avoided service; leaders who would not ask the same of their own children; leaders who continue to support a lost cause for political reasons. Chaplains could break the sad news that soldiers died in vain - and even worse, their efforts and sacrifice only increased the level of violence and suffering in the world. Chaplains wielding the unarmed truth about war and the military would make up a powerful force for peace.