



Between soul support and moral reference: for an assertive role of military chaplaincy

military-Earth thinking notebook

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At a time when the armed forces are refocusing on the conduct of operations, the core of their profession, one may question the relevance of maintaining a military chaplaincy. It is in operations that it finds its justification. Through the original status it confers on its members, it now has the capacity to give meaning to the actions of soldiers on operations.

If there were to be an institution that illustrates a peaceful and concrete way of living secularism in France, military chaplaincy would be a textbook case. Without any noise, the grooming initiated in 2005 by the reform of the general status of military personnel (SGM) has helped to provide the armies with an organized and coherent body that represents the religions, and that can provide any soldier with the advice, the sacraments or the accompaniment that his faith requires. Today, 300 chaplains of the various religions carry out this mission. They report jointly to their chaplain-in-chief for matters relating to their faith, and to the military authority for the manner in which they carry out their missions within defence formations.

However, in these constrained budgetary times, when financial pressure weighs on the institutions and forces them to choose to refocus on the mission and on the core business, this visible role is no longer sufficient. The overall rationalisation and restructuring process underway in the armed forces should logically also affect military chaplaincies as they serve the Defence and are financed by its budget. We are therefore now entitled to question the advisability of maintaining such a component in the armed forces, unless we can prove its contribution to the operations they are conducting today, since this is the core of their profession.

And it is there, at the heart of operations, that the military chaplain, a man of worship and a soldier subordinate to his hierarchy, finds the justification for his status. Through his original vision, independent and institutional at the same time, he is the one who can give meaning to the action of the soldier on operations.

The contribution of military chaplaincy will be studied here through the questions of the

soldier in operation, through the mission he leads and the more global vision of the practice of the profession of arms.

Giving meaning to personal questioning

The sociology of the soldier today is marked by a great poverty of philosophical or theological reference points. Most of the young people involved know nothing of the meaning of religious cults and are unable to untangle the approximations taught in the school of the republic from the media clichés. Yet, in a general context of loss of reference points, religious belonging intrigues, philosophical roots question. This question ignored, repressed or killed in metropolitan France emerges at a time of danger, in the face of the enemy and in the face of death. This violence and this fire of action, freely chosen by the soldier, distinguishes him. The experience of the danger or its perspective remains no less traumatic, and makes the questions he asks himself about his identity, the faith of his parents, or even the existence of the afterlife, all the more important. It is therefore here a way of defining oneself in one's group but also in relation to one's enemy.

This personal questioning is healthy because it builds man, strengthens him in his positions and makes him stable. He still needs to find an available, trained and sufficiently neutral ear so that it is only advice, i.e. non-partisan, without any hierarchical relationship, and not a technical medical opinion.

The privileged role of the military chaplain is expressed here with great acuity. An attentive ear, he "listens" to everyone. His place, next to the hierarchy, makes him accessible to the humblest as well as to the chief who often sees in him a palliative to his loneliness. The availability to which he testifies, since everything is turned towards the military community, the peace of the place with which he is associated attracts those who are looking for themselves and offers them the elements of a very personal response.

He is also a "reference" because he is a man of God and also a man of God's science. His voice thus carries on all that is religious regardless of the religion he serves. He is therefore a guarantor of the orthodoxy of the practice of the faith and, in a way, a safeguard against any excess or any practice harmful to the mission of the armed forces and to respect for other sensibilities. The growing proportion of young recruits of the Muslim faith confirms the importance of this role. It thus makes it possible to avoid, or at least to provide a framework for, spontaneous groupings by organising worship on board the Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier, for example.

A listening role and authority of reference are added to the requirements of the cult for which he is responsible and enable the military chaplain to support the soul of all the soldiers in operation. In short, this mission is a natural extension of his duties in metropolitan France. It is now important to go further and entrust him with the task of giving meaning to the mission.

Giving meaning to the mission

The mission is the soldier's prerogative, his *raison d'être*, his purpose, his cult, so to speak. Yet the military chaplain seems to be excluded from it, as if it were taking place in a temporal parenthesis to which he would not have access. Yet he is present on operations and continues in the FOBs^[1] the work initiated in metropolitan France. But at the time of the mission, he seems to refrain from taking part in its unfolding as if there were a risk of

compromising himself by getting too involved in the action.

But there is a place for it. As a soldier and as a pastor, if his action cannot be part of the fury of the fighting, it is in the preparation and reading of the fighting that his action could be decisive.

Lyautey, in his work for the pacification of Morocco, had this famous word: "I have not come foreign over a desert, nor to annex land, but to rally souls. To be colonial is to make friendship". While the French armies are engaged in Libya, Afghanistan or Lebanon, how could we do without a rabbi, an imam or a Catholic priest to get to know the philosophy of the Sunni, Shiite, Jewish or Maronite populations with whom we work. Because acculturation in the country requires an understanding of the cults that surround it, the MCPs of the units leaving for OPEX could benefit from the intervention of a chaplain who shares the faith of the population in which they will be immersed. The soldier, through very practical measures, would learn to behave in accordance with rites and customs.

And then, when the action has taken place and some have died, it is a matter of explaining, giving or recalling the meaning of this life offered. Through the verb, the chaplain has this power. His voice carries in the tight circle because he has shared the conditions of the mission. His voice carries beyond because on the margins, his purpose is not institutional. "While some people wonder about the opportunity to go and die for the Afghans, or even for nothing, we answer tirelessly: it is for France that we are dying," Bishop Ravel, Bishop of the Armed Forces, forcefully hammered home during the tribute to the seven soldiers killed in Afghanistan in July 2011.

Supporting souls and supporting the mission, the chaplain sees his essential role in operations underpinned by essential training in ethics.

Giving a moral sense to the execution of the profession of arms

Largely affected by rationalism, efficiency at the lowest cost, or by an essentially accounting vision, the exercise of the profession of arms does not lead the soldier to consider the moral sense of its execution. To have largely banished philosophical reflection from our training system appears to be a serious flaw which in the long run will lead to the loss of meaning and reference points which is already gnawing at us today.

Now, being capable of personal discernment presupposes having been instructed beforehand. Focused on an essentially legal approach, military training in the controlled use of force cannot, in fact, disregard a more comprehensive training of the individual in terms of ethics and behaviour. This is the concern and one of the roles of the command. That is where there would be a justification for a military chaplaincy in metropolitan France, invested in the moral training of young executives. Finally, at the politico-military level, it would be able to express its opinion on the appropriateness of armed engagement.

Chaplains could thus contribute to the moral training and refinement of the consciences of the military in the units where they are posted. A trained conscience and clear ethical benchmarks undoubtedly remain a solid basis for an intelligent appreciation of the rules of law and their courageous application. This is an essential and preliminary question, particularly with a view to confronting the violence of the world and to legitimising military action in the service of peace. The military, and first and foremost their executives or future executives, would be keen not to be satisfied with a little ethical veneer, but to

consider it a serious responsibility to engage in a reflection likely to make them discover and make them adhere in depth to the doctrine of natural law and its stakes.

Beyond that, military chaplaincy as the guarantor of a plurality of consciences has a crossover view of our country's commitment to armed confrontation. This view cannot be accused of being partisan. On the contrary, it is the reflection of universal wisdom, weighed down by the disparity and number of philosophies that support it. Communicating this to the hierarchy requires restraint and intellectual discipline outside the media. Nevertheless, the hierarchy would benefit from having an enlightened and enlightening vision, which it could argue if the armed engagement it was asked to make contravened the rules of simple natural law, or if war once again became the sole responsibility of the prince.

Armies experience a paradox. If the dilution of the religious fact seems only the fact of old Europe, the theatres in which they carry out their operations are marked by an important influence of religions. Military chaplaincy has a major role to play and its contribution, by giving meaning to action, directly benefits the operational capacity of soldiers. This role could be asserted by taking the necessary moral credit for their actions, from training to counselling.

The rise of communitarianism in France and the multiplication of social fractures make it impossible to rule out intervention by the armed forces on national territory. Rich in its diversity, military chaplaincy finds here a challenge commensurate with its capabilities.

1) Forward Operation Base: Forward operating base from which coalition units launch their operations in Afghanistan.

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