



Representing the Moral Warrior: The Just War Tradition, Military Chaplains, and Moral Leadership¹

By Daniel M. Bell Jr.

“What the bad man cannot be is a good sailor, or soldier, or airman.”²

– General Sir John Winthrop Hackett

The just war tradition is a rich resource in the Christian tradition and beyond, from which military chaplains can draw while living out their callings to care for the souls of those in their charge. In contrast with something approximating a fixed doctrine, however, the just war tradition admits of significant variation both historically and practically. In what follows I introduce the practice of just war as an instantiation of a virtue or character ethic and then discuss the implications of this way of conceiving just war for the moral leadership of military chaplains.

While space constraints preclude a robust defense of this way of laying out my argument, briefly stated, my rationale is that a virtue or character ethic best correlates with both Christian living, my own tradition, and the profession of arms. Regarding the latter, Karl Marlantes writes:

The warrior operates in extreme zones. The more removed a situation like combat gets from everyday life, the less applicable the guidelines get. This is why we must rely so

much on character rather than rules when discussing and experiencing extreme situations like war . . . When we meet the next test, we can meet it only with the character we have at the time.³

Indeed, although it is not widely recognized within the U.S. military, that institution carries within itself the nascent practice of and potential for a robust virtue ethic. Accordingly, a just war ethic understood in terms of virtue and character is fitting.

I discuss the implications of a virtue-based just war ethic for the exercise of moral leadership for military chaplains. In doing so, I draw upon not only scholarly research but also experience working with the military and with chaplains on just war and ethics – through the military’s advanced civilian education program, the Command and General Staff College (where I worked with both Soldiers and instructors on these matters), several denominations’ judicatories overseeing chaplains, and as a seminary professor for almost twenty years.

Two Visions of Just War

I briefly contrast a virtue or character ethic understanding of just war with a conventional understanding, which I call a “check list” approach.

The conventional understanding of just war is as a kind of public policy check list. It is very much in line with a dominant approach to morality, which is rule centered. Ethics is about knowing the rules and then summoning the will power to obey them. Just war becomes a check list of rules that anyone can use on the eve of war. Character does not matter in this approach. You can be a scoundrel, one with little interest in justice and who has never cared about your neighbor, and yet if you can check off the criteria, you can claim the mantle of a just warrior. Laying this claim requires no training, no formation. What it requires is simply compliance – only memorization and the willpower to obey.

The alternative vision that I want to highlight is just war as an instantiation of character, as an expression of the character of a people. Specifically, it is the extension of the character / virtues that mark the everyday life of a people before, during, and after war. Unjust persons cannot wage just wars. Not because they cannot memorize a check list but because they lack the well-formed judgment and the character to embody and sustain the virtues that the criteria presuppose and point toward. The alternative vision I endorse of just war is one that recognizes how a person is not likely to sustain justice, prudence, honor, courage (physical and moral) in the moral pressure cooker that is war if one has not learned to embody such virtues in one’s daily life prior to entering the field of battle.

Leading Moral Warriors

These two visions correspond to two very different ways of conceiving and enacting moral leadership. In what follows, I consider the implications of a virtue-based just war ethic in terms of three challenges / opportunities military chaplains face in exercising moral leadership.

TEACH JUST WAR

For just war to serve as a resource, it needs to be known. Just war needs to be taught systematically and consistently to both Soldiers and chaplains.⁴

When just war is taught, it is frequently resisted and rejected. The value or importance of the tradition is not appreciated. For chaplains to exercise moral leadership they need to not only teach just war but help Soldier’s find its value, help Soldiers embrace their identity as moral warriors.

While working with instructors charged with teaching ethics to officers, I was regularly told that just war was irrelevant and that it was ignored in their lessons. The reasoning behind this judgment came through in the comments officers and instructors made regarding just war. For example, one instructor became very agitated when he discerned that if evaluated by the just war tradition, the Indian Wars, Sherman’s total war tactics, and World War II were not just. After reaching this conclusion, he dismissed the just war tradition, proclaiming that it was absurd that those wars might not be regarded as moral and just. Another insisted that the Army’s doctrinally-stated mission, “Win the nation’s wars,” did not include any moral caveats. Instructors and chaplains have told me that just war

was irrelevant and so unnecessary because Soldiers were either resigned to being murderers or are okay with killing. Another theme concerned the force protection imperative. Soldiers insisted that pragmatic concerns for Soldier safety trumped ethics. My final example is related to what Robert Jay Lifton calls “doubling,” and others have called “fragmentation.”⁵ That is, how some Soldiers divide their moral selves into distinct personae operating in different realms with disparate moral codes, e.g., being in uniform or out of uniform, in garrison or down range, or the disavowal of moral agency expressed in the sentiment “I was just following orders.”⁶

Addressing this resistance and rejection is where the difference made by conceiving of just war as an expression of character instead of as a check list emerges most clearly. The deontological, check list approach largely conceives leadership in terms of reiterating the rules, summoning the willpower for compliance, and perhaps incentivizing such compliance through sanctions. It gives little thought to and certainly does not expect Soldiers to ask why they should comply. Here are the rules: obey. To which Soldiers should respond, “Ours is not to reason why.”

In contrast, just war conceived as an expression of character recognizes that obedience and will power are not sufficient. What is desired is not mere compliance but commitment to and the internalization of the values / virtues the tradition embodies and expresses. Waging war in accord with moral parameters is not just something one is ordered to do; it is an expression of who one is, of who one aspires to be as a U.S. Soldier and citizen.

Much more ought to be said about those virtues and their formation, more than the allotted space permits.⁷ Let it suffice for the moment to say a word about moving from compliance to commitment – a key shift in moving from a deontological to a character ethic.

Commitment is nurtured in many ways, starting with teaching not only “what” but “why.” Understanding why something is done the way it is done – why it is valued – is a crucial component in nurturing the internalization of a moral vision.

The litany of objections to just war (and ethics) identified previously make it clear that many Soldiers (including chaplains) do not appreciate the “why,” the value of just war commitments, of which there are many, from the pragmatic to matters of character and identity. For example, many fail to recognize the strategic value of just war / ethics in winning hearts and minds – whether that is a matter of

maintaining domestic support or reducing grievances that feed insurgency. Many do not recognize the importance of just war / ethics in preserving hearts and minds, that is, in potentially avoiding moral injury. Moral Soldiers, just warriors, need not see themselves as murders.

Likewise, many Soldiers have a superficial understanding of their mission (one with no moral caveats) and do not see that their calling as professionals (as opposed to mere experts or even public mercenaries) is to the ethical application of force. U.S. Soldiers are called to be moral warriors. Just war and ethics more generally are an instantiation of our identity.

The “why” that is military and national character sheds light on the importance of countering the aforementioned doubling of the self, captured so well in the canard that good garrison Soldiers do not make good combat Soldiers and

vice versa. At the heart of character is the Army value of integrity. Integrity is about embodying one’s moral commitments consistently within and across the various and diverse roles one inhabits in life. As Alasdair MacIntyre describes it, “To have integrity is to refuse to be . . . one kind of person in one social context, while quite another in other contexts. It is to have set inflexible limits to one’s adaptability to the roles that one may be called upon to play.”⁸ Integrity means maintaining one’s moral commitments with the passing of time, in the face of changing situations and circumstances. Integrity – staying true to who they are – is why moral warriors fight the way they do.

OWN MORAL LEADERSHIP

The second challenge concerns chaplains’ identity, specifically, owning and asserting chaplains’ proper identity as moral leaders.



The challenge here is what I will call, as a catch-all, “ineffective chaplains.”⁹ It encompasses many things that can be summed up in what William Mahedy calls “chaplain bullshit.”¹⁰ It involves chaplains who are more focused on fighting the culture wars than exercising a moral leadership role. Chaplain BS involves chaplains whose first devotion is to their careers and advancement and/or to the role of cheerleader / morale booster / force multiplier. It involves chaplains who lack moral courage – such as the chaplain serving at a military academy who told me he would never pray for enemies in the chapel for fear of backlash. It involves chaplains who so want to “fit in” that they unwittingly compromise their role as chaplain – be it by taking up arms or proffering alcohol and dirty jokes, etc.¹¹

Chaplain BS is an indication of a host of issues around chaplain identity. I wish to focus on chaplains owning and asserting their proper identity as moral leaders. Neither chaplains as caretakers of souls (only) nor chaplains as morale boosters / force multipliers is an adequate vision of the calling of chaplaincy, at least from my perspective as a Christian.

Chaplains as moral leaders should tend to souls, and they should encourage persons to persevere in the good. Indeed, good moral leadership requires both soul-care and morale-care. The problem is when these two important tasks are divorced from moral leadership / guidance and so become morally indifferent (souls only) or morally corrupt (hitched to morally unexamined or questionable ends).

Now, obviously, in the face of the aforementioned obstacles reminding Soldiers of the moral foundations of military service and advocating on behalf of moral warriors will require moral courage. Indeed, it may require

significant sacrifice and cost. Ultimately, full moral leadership might require revisiting how chaplains are embedded in the military. It might require an independent chaplaincy, which would ask chaplains to sacrifice the cultural capital that accrues military rank and service.

REPRESENT THE MORAL WARRIOR

The third opportunity in many ways brings the aforementioned challenges / opportunities together insofar as it concerns embracing a different moral vision and practice of moral leadership. Chaplains should represent the moral warrior.

This involves leaving behind a flawed moral vision and concomitant practice of moral leadership. There are three facets to this: a general moral culture, an ethical decision-making model, and a lived focus. Regarding the general moral culture, the military shares a moral ethos with wider modern Western culture, namely, a broadly deontological ethos where ethics are conceived in terms of obligations in the form of rules and principles. Ethics is a matter of information / rules / principles and compliance through willpower. Accordingly, moral leadership becomes largely a matter of promulgating the rules and encouraging / enforcing compliance.

The second facet is that of the dominant ethical decision-making model, and it is fascinating in part for how it undercuts the deontological character of the general ethos. This is the ethical triangle whereby Soldiers are encouraged to run moral decisions through a simplistic three-fold calculus of virtue, rules, and outcomes.¹² While this EDMM is reductionistic to the point of being a caricature, having seen it being

taught and “applied,” it is difficult not to conclude that the point of this model is to develop feasible justifications for circumventing moral strictures.

The second facet leads nicely to the third, which is the “on the ground” lived ethic. The mission focus, along with the force protection imperative as a kind of moral sidecar, renders the functioning military ethic basically consequentialist. As Timothy Challans puts it, the warrior ethos is really about a special kind of work ethic, one that centers on mission accomplishment . . . not on moral restraints and law-abidingness.”¹³ It is a work ethic that can be summed up as “maximize military proficiency.”¹⁴

Chaplains embracing and leading in the formation of just warriors, of warriors who own their moral commitments as an expression of the character of the military and the nation, means leading beyond fostering mere compliance with rules, beyond the sloganeering that drives a work ethic in service to consequentialism. Chaplains can lead by representing the moral warrior.

What I mean can be clarified by way of contrast. Modern deontological and consequentialist visions amount to ethics without representation, that is, they focus on the memorization of and willed compliance with rules or formulas (be it the greatest good for the greatest number or an ethical triangle). Beyond information and will-power, they require little. No wonder ethics training is conceived primarily in terms of PowerPoints and classes.

In contrast, a virtue or character ethic is primarily about representation. It is about modeling, exemplifying, displaying 24/7 the character that Soldiers as moral warriors should inhabit as Soldiers

and citizens. This is to say, moral leadership is first and foremost about living out the virtues.

In this regard, consider how the military uses stories and traditions to nurture the warrior ethos. The military excels at passing on traditions and stories of physical courage. From the visual imagery to the songs and cadences to the stories interspersed in training exercises, Soldiers are immersed in a world filled with models and reminders of forward-leaning, hard-charging physical courage. Chaplains could lead in representing that same physical courage rightly ordered by moral courage.¹⁵ Chaplains could lead in seeing to it that stories, examples, models of moral warriors are interspersed and integrated into training the same way as the stories of physical valor.

And I do mean lead, not just advocate.¹⁶ Chaplains' proximity / access to Soldiers becomes an opening for developing and displaying the commitment (relationships of care), the character and the competence that elicit the trust that enables the strongest leadership. Put a little differently, chaplains may lack command authority, but they may inspire. Especially today, with a postmodern generation that has a diminished respect for positional authority, inspiration is more powerful than positional authority for nurturing commitment and ownership of a moral vision.

Chaplains may not (always) have a voice, they may not (always) have a say in decisions, but they can always represent. Clergy often speak of exercising a

ministry of "presence" in situations where words may not avail. Military chaplains may exercise a kind of moral leadership by presence, if their presence – their character – represents the moral traditions that sustain moral warriors.

Put in terms of conventional leadership theory and practice, chaplains are particularly well-situated to exercise leadership "from the middle." Indeed, they are prime candidates to exercise morally courageous followership.¹⁷ This is the case not only because of their unique position in relation to Soldiers and Commanders but also because leadership from the middle / courageous followership is fundamentally about character, about embodying virtues, about representation.

By way of example, allow me to recall Martin of Tours, a figure who looms large in the history of military chaplaincy. When called out on account of his faith, Martin of Tours demanded that he be placed at the front lines of battle, unarmed. As such, he is a paragon of physical and moral courage. Chaplains, unarmed in the midst of battle, represent that same virtue – physical and moral courage – which every Soldier who aspires to be moral warrior would do well to emulate.

Conclusion

This essay began with an epigram about bad men not being good Soldiers. Unfortunately, it is not true. At least, it is not an apodictic truth. Whether it is true or not depends on the moral vision, or

lack thereof, that animates a people and its military. By doctrine, by the best that we as Americans say about ourselves, by the best to which we aspire and achieve, US Soldiers are not mere experts. They are not public mercenaries. They are professionals bound by a moral vision; they are moral warriors.

Chaplains can steward this moral foundation and lead in moral formation – inspiring commitment, ownership, embodiment of the virtues that constitute the character of a moral warrior. And they can do this by drawing on the wisdom of religious traditions, especially where that wisdom intersects with the moral foundations of the military, as it does in the case of the just war tradition.

Admittedly, this stewardship and this leadership are not easy because they are not unconstrained. Leadership from the middle is never easy. To exercise these opportunities – to represent virtue in garrison and down range – requires physical and moral courage. It requires selfless service and sacrifice. Yet chaplains should not be alone in shouldering these challenges and reaching for these opportunities. Chaplains and civilians both have roles to play. Indeed, chaplains need their religious communities for the formation and support to carry out their calling, their mission, and religious communities need chaplains for the same reasons. Only working together, in a shared mission, can we make Hackett's claim a reality.¹⁸

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NOTES

- 1 An expanded version of this paper was first presented in a scholarly working group as part of the The Care of Souls, The Ethics of War, and the Wisdom of Sacred Communities Conference, Duke University, Durham, NC, November 2022.
- 2 John Winthrop Hackett, "The Military in the Service of the State," USAF Harmon Memorial Lecture #13 (1970), <https://www.usafa.edu/app/uploads/Harmon13.pdf>.
- 3 Karl Marlantes, *What It Is Like to Go To War* (New York: Atlantic Monthly, 2011), 60, 107. See also Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).
- 4 This teaching must be pervasive, iterative, developmental, at echelon, for both enlisted and officer. Teach it at enlisted basic training (there is a chaplain at every basic training battalion) and teach it at all levels of enlisted Professional Military Education and Sergeants Major Academy. Chaplains should teach it at all Basic Officer Leadership Courses and all branches' Captain's Career Courses. But it must be required at Intermediate Level Education, the Army War College, and especially at Capstone for General Officers – in short, across all Professional Military Education.
- 5 See Robert J. Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (NY: Basic, 1986), 418ff. Paul Berghaus and Nathan Cartagena use the language of fragmentation in their "Developing Good Soldiers: The Problem with Fragmentation within the Army," *Journal of Military Ethics* 12.4 (2013): 287-303.
- 6 An insightful treatment on the issue of obeying orders from a virtue/character perspective is offered by Mark Osiel, *Obeying Orders: Atrocity, Military Discipline and the Law of War* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2002).
- 7 My book, *Just War as Christian Discipleship: Recentering the Tradition in the Church rather than the State* (Brazos, 2009) treats just war from a virtue / character ethic perspective. See also my Ekklesia Project pamphlet "Just War as Christian Discipleship," <https://www.ekklesiaproject.org/pamphlets/just-war-as-christian-discipleship>.
- 8 Alasdair MacIntyre, "Social Structures and their Threats to Moral Agency," *Philosophy* 74.289 (1999): 317.
- 9 This is not necessarily or primarily an indictment of individual chaplains. It has much to do with the failures of churches and perhaps with the way military chaplaincy itself is structured.
- 10 William Mahedy, *Out of the Night, the Spiritual Journey of Vietnam Vets* (Knoxville, TN: Greyhound, 2005 [1986]), 145ff. Mahedy focuses on chaplains who refused to see and speak the truth, who were blind to the sin involved in war, who were wrapped up in civil religion.
- 11 I am not suggesting that chaplains cannot and should not fit in. The question is *how* to do that in manner that maintains one's integrity as a chaplain.
- 12 See Department of the Army, *Army Leadership and the Profession* (ADP 6-22) (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2019), 3-38, 4-41.
- 13 Timothy Challans, *Awakening Warrior: Revolution in the Ethics of Warfare* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 11. Roger Wertheimer summarizes this work ethic in terms of "maximizing military proficiency" in "The Morality of Military Education" in *Empowering our Military Conscience: Transforming Just War Theory and Military Moral Education*, ed. Roger Wertheimer (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 159ff.
- 14 Wertheimer, "Military Education," 167ff.
- 15 Physical courage not ordered by moral courage is not a virtue but a vice, a *simulacra* perhaps better called rashness or viciousness. More charitably, one might recognize it as a kind of defective courage.
- 16 By advocacy, I mean talking about and exhorting others to act morally. By leadership, I mean inspiring people to commit to something and act accordingly.
- 17 See, for example, Ira Chaleff, *The Courageous Follower: Standing Up to and for Our Leaders* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2009).
- 18 Thanks to Larry Dabeck for (years of) insight and advice on these matters as well as John Jensen for comments on a draft of this essay. I am grateful, as well, for Adam Tietje's insightful assistance in revising this essay for publication.