
Deployed Chaplains as Force Multipliers Through Religious Engagement

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Abstract

Military chaplaincy is by its nature a challenging and demanding vocation, but one which presents opportunities that our roles as clergy in civilian life could never engender. Engagement with indigenous religious groups while deployed on operations is one such opportunity — fraught with difficulties and potential dangers, but rich in the rewards it brings. This paper will argue the case for the emerging specialist role for chaplains as a tool for commanders in force multiplication through engagement with indigenous religious leaders and groups by building bridges of understanding which can only be established at a religious level.

It is no secret that chaplains provide a valuable resource to commanders at all levels, with the majority of our work concerned with caring for the well-being of our soldiers and their families. Naturally this role is of great importance when on deployment, and indeed this was my experience when deployed to Operation SLIPPER with 2nd Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (2 RAR) Mentoring Task Force 3 (MTF-3) in 2011–2012. Having said this, the chaplain's specialist religious knowledge and position provide a largely untapped commander's resource on deployment — religious engagement with indigenous religious groups in the relevant area of operations.

This article will argue the case for an expanded role for military chaplains in terms of religious engagement and will do so through a brief discussion of historical examples of chaplains' involvement in religious engagement and an examination of the current literature on this important topic. Primarily, however, the article is a description of my role in Uruzgan with MTF-3 and the way that I became involved in religious engagement with the local Afghan National Army (ANA) Mullahs and the enormous benefits — both personal and for the task force and ANA brigade — that resulted from this engagement.

I have a vivid recollection of what I believe was a divine calling to religious engagement when I was at Al Minhad Air Base in the United Arab Emirates preparing to enter Afghanistan for the first time. It was early morning — just before sunrise, in fact — and I was out running in an effort to keep fit and also avoid the stifling June heat. I jogged past the base mosque just as the Imam was giving the morning call to prayer. I like to engage in prayer and reflection as I run and this time a notion hit me from out of the blue and a plan for engaging with Muslim leaders in Uruzgan Province coalesced in my mind. I found myself compelled to mount a totally foreign endeavour in a foreign land — but more about my approach later.

At its most basic level, religious engagement can be defined as:

Any command-directed contact or interaction where the chaplain, as the command's religious representative, meets with a leader on matters of religion to ameliorate suffering and to promote peace and the benevolent expression of religion.¹

Thus, religious engagement involves the chaplain meeting and entering into a dialogue with religious representatives on a religious level to promote peace and harmony through understanding in the area of operations. For religious engagement to be authentic and effective it must not have as its objective the achievement of specific military goals or intelligence-gathering, otherwise it risks

becoming a tainted and fraudulent façade for the application of force, not a power for peace, reconciliation and the cessation of conflict. Since religious engagement involves religious dialogue, building mutual understanding and respect with the end result the amelioration of suffering and promotion of peace, it is a task for which we as chaplains are well educated and prepared; indeed for such a task, there are no better agents than the padre.

Religious engagement in its broadest sense is not necessarily new for chaplaincy in the Australian Army, nor for our coalition partners. There has been a healthy degree of religious engagement in previous wars along with some more recent reflection and experience both in Australia and overseas. Catholic historian Tom Johnstone comments that padres seem to have always been interested in working with local communities in addition to their task force responsibilities.² In Vietnam, Australian chaplains such as Father Gerry Cudmore conducted Mass for Vietnamese villagers in the Iron Triangle in 1965, and in 1966 Father John Williams integrated with a local Catholic community in Binh Ba as part of a civic affairs program. He celebrated Mass with the local congregation and Australian soldiers also attended; this built trust and friendship between the Vietnamese community and the Task Force.³

Johnstone discusses the involvement of chaplains with local communities in more recent deployments following the Vietnam War, particularly in United Nations peacekeeping operations such as East Timor. In East Timor, for instance, 2 RAR Chaplain Farther Glynn Murphy was involved with the local Timorese Catholic community.⁴ Moving forward to the Iraq conflict, Chaplain Bob Bishop was clearly focused on deliberate dialogue and engagement when he spoke of 'building bridges of common mutual understanding' with the Muslim community. However he expressed regret that he was limited in this endeavour because command viewed him as a 'high value political target'.⁵

Over the last decade a number of authors have written specifically on the topic of religious engagement by chaplains. As far back as 2004, Lee, Burke and Crayne discussed the concept of military chaplains as peace-builders through religious engagement. They argued that,

*The doctrinal role of United States military chaplains must be expanded to allow for formal inclusion of indigenous religious groups and religious leaders into stability operations ... described as the role of religious liaison.*⁶

The authors assert that this additional role of religious liaison could be viewed as an expansion of the traditional chaplain's role of adviser to the commander. As I mentioned earlier, the chaplain is eminently suited to this role.⁷

As recently as 2013, Canadian academic and former military chaplain Steven K. Moore published a seminal work on religious engagement, *Military Chaplains as Agents of Peace: Religious Leader Engagement in Conflict and Post-Conflict Environments*.⁸ Based on his 2008 doctoral thesis, Moore's thorough and insightful research explores the emerging role of operational chaplains from a theoretical basis, then anecdotally, by examining case studies of Canadian, French, United States, New Zealand and Norwegian endeavours in conflicts from Kosovo to Afghanistan. Moore views religious (leader) engagement 'as an evolving domain of ministry among operational chaplains'.⁹ He explains that it is in operational settings 'that an irenic impulse among military chaplains is leading to a peace-building role among religious leaders and their respective communities within indigenous populations' while at the same time in no way undermining their sacramental and pastoral responsibilities to their troops.¹⁰ The success of the chaplain lies in his or her role as a 'tolerant voice' and the subsequent sharing which this tolerant voice precipitates.¹¹

Similarly, the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff also produced a publication in 2013 — *Religious Affairs in Joint Operations* — in which they assert that, in many cases, clergy-to-clergy communication is preferred by indigenous religious leaders and that chaplains have the requisite knowledge, experience and training to ensure their religious legitimacy which may directly contribute to the success of the mission.¹² They envisage this sort of engagement as designed to 'build trust and confidence, share information, coordinate mutual activities and maintain influence' and to 'ameliorate suffering ... promote peace and the benevolent expression of religion.'¹³

Given my own experience, I can identify with Chaplain Bob Bishop's Iraq recollection since the response he received was similar to the reaction I encountered when I proposed my involvement with religious engagement to my commanders. Fortunately for me, the security situation in Uruzgan was better, the United States military was already involved in religious engagement and MTF-3 had the brigade-level Operational Mentor Liaison Team (OMLT) in operation, so there was some scope for my proposal. MTF-3 commander, Lieutenant Colonel Chris Smith, and his counterpart at Combined Team Uruzgan, Deputy Commander Colonel David Smith, both gave their cautious assent, although I still suspect there was some reluctance based on concerns for the safety of the padre in this 'risky venture'!

My plan was two-fold. First, I proposed to build understanding with both the ANA and with local mosque communities by becoming the conduit for gifts of the Qur'an from the Australian Muslim community to Afghan Muslims. I arranged with an Imam in Queensland who had just become the chair of the Queensland Council of Imams to send me copies of the Qur'an, suitably wrapped, sealed, and clearly marked as gifts from Australian Muslims to Afghan mosque communities. He was more than happy to reach out this way and the boxes were soon in the mail and on their way. My intent was to counter the misinformation spread by the Taliban that International Security Assistance Force soldiers were in Afghanistan as crusaders bent on the overthrow of Islam, when in fact we were there to help them secure their country and to support them in reconstruction. In this vein, I believed it would be beneficial for Afghans to realise that there were Muslims in Australia who lived in harmony with the non-Muslim population, and to back this up by gifts of the greatest magnitude to a Muslim — the Holy Qur'an. I have to stress that the gifts of the Qur'an were **not from me**; although, yes, I had arranged them. But I was simply the conduit for the Australian Muslim community to support Afghan Muslims. I have vivid recollection of the overwhelming reception from Mullahs in both the ANA throughout Uruzgan and civilians in Tarin Kot. One older man was overcome with emotion and held the Qur'an to his forehead in devotion; another said to me that this was the greatest gift they could receive and could not stop thanking me. Suffice to say, the gifted Qur'ans opened doors for dialogue and understanding in ways I could not have anticipated. I am indebted to the Queensland Muslim community for their willingness to support this venture.

The second aspect of my religious engagement was to act as a mentor to the religious officers in the ANA. This was a project in which it appears the Dutch had been engaged at some point and which United States forces were again beginning to involve themselves at a Regional Command – South level. My predecessor, Chaplain Renton McRae, had attended a conference in Kandahar on religious engagement, but unfortunately his deployment had come to an end just as this endeavour was ramping up. The ball was passed to me, and indeed the soil of my heart had been ploughed over and I was ready to run with the idea.

I was attached to the Brigade OMLT under Major Andrew Baker and began meeting with the 4th ANA Brigade Religious Officer and the brigade Mullahs at the ANA base adjacent to Multinational Base Tarin Kot. This role was expanded when I visited MTF-3 soldiers in their various forward operating bases and I was invited to spend time with many of the *kandak* (roughly equivalent to a battalion) religious officers throughout Uruzgan. The role of religious officer is not specifically a religious position, and is not set aside for ANA personnel with specific training.

It is probably more akin to a welfare officer role. My role as a 'mentor' had nothing to do with specific religious material, instead it became an advisory role when problems in the brigade or *kandak* emerged and the religious officer wanted to discuss ideas and possible approaches. I was also a conduit for the endless requests for material support, although these were not always as successful as the ANA officers would have liked! More often than not, when I went to visit the religious officers, the *kandak* Mullah was present as well and so we would engage in inter-religious dialogue in addition to my 'mentoring' of the religious officer.

While I cannot quantify the effect of my involvement in religious engagement, I can relate some anecdotes which illustrate the enormous potential of religious engagement. After hosting one discussion at my office (with coffee and Tim Tams!) with the brigade religious officer, the brigade Mullah (a Sunni) and a Mullah from Tarin Kot (a Hazara Shia), the three Afghans requested a visit to our Ghan chapel and an explanation of the Christian faith and practice. I was taken aback, but it was then my great joy to walk them through the Ghan chapel, explain the practices of our faith and the connection between Australia and Afghanistan as exemplified by the naming of the chapel. They left with a much-improved understanding of the Christian faith and practice and the historical relationship between our two nations.

On another occasion I flew into Patrol Base Wali to spend a few days with the combat team there. I stowed my pack and webbing in the usual spot and went off to Headquarters to say 'G'day' to the Officer Commanding (OC) and operations staff. As I approached the hesco hut, the OC came out and said, 'Padre, so you are here. The ANA are looking for you.' It appears the ANA commander, religious officer and Mullah had become aware of my arrival and had immediately sent a message to the OC — 'We hear your Mullah has arrived and we want to see him!' Hence, I became known as 'the [Australian] Mullah'. The 4th ANA Brigade Mullah (Mullah Nassim) went further and announced to me one day that they had decided to give me an Arabic name — Hamza, meaning 'brave and strong' — because of the effort I had devoted to understanding their faith and assisting them. My relationship with Mullah Nassim and the 4th Brigade religious officer was helped considerably when, in the midst of some difficulties the officer was having with his commander, I suggested that the Mullah pray and we ask the Almighty for help. We bowed our heads and he recited Qur'an verses and prayed. He later told me that this was a pivotal time for him in his relationship with Christians and with me because I had demonstrated respect for him and his Islamic belief.

I have vivid memories of sitting on the floor over many cups of chai (tea) discussing faith, practice, belief and the *Ingil* (Gospel) with Mullahs firing as many challenging questions at me as they could. One of my treasured memories is being in a room with some five Mullahs and, after a long talk, one of them commenting, 'Yes ... interesting ... this too is in the Holy Qur'an ...' and the others nodding. Of course, the dialogue could only go so far; once it turned to the divinity of Christ and the nature of Godhead, we had to agree to disagree; but, most importantly, they listened. I have to admit that the learning was not all one way; I learned a great deal about the Muslim faith and was personally challenged by their faithfulness and devotion to prayer. Indeed, I formed some close bonds with my Afghan counterparts and it was with some very mixed feelings that I left the country when our deployment came to an end.

There are many, many stories I could relate, but for me the success of the relationships I had built was demonstrated when I handed over to Mentoring Task Force – 4 Chaplain Martin Johnson and he discovered that the Mullahs and religious officers were keen to continue the dialogue and mentoring. Before I left the country a request arrived from one of the patrol bases from an ANA religious officer who was asking why the new Australian Mullah had not yet come to visit. Martin continued to pass on the remaining copies of the Qur'an as opportunities presented themselves and so the work of relationship-building continued. I had one final privilege before returning to Australia, and that was to respond to a request from the United States chaplains at Kandahar to come and speak to them about my involvement with religious engagement in a seminar which I entitled 'Religious Engagement – Building Bridges of Understanding'. I received a very warm and enthusiastic response from the assembled brethren who were keen to explore their own opportunities for religious engagement.

To understand the possible effect of religious engagement and the subsequent relationship with the Mullahs, this relationship must be viewed in context of the place of the local Mullah in Afghan Islamic practice. The Mullah may be a semi-literate village-appointed Mullah, or he may be a well-educated Islamic cleric skilled in the Qur'an and in Islamic jurisprudence. But, in all cases, Mullahs are respected and listened to intently by their communities. Lee, Burke, and Crayne point out that in Western countries there is a separation of church and state, but this is not so in Muslim countries where religious leaders are as powerful, if not more powerful, than the political leaders.¹⁴ So, the investment of time in dispelling falsehood and misinformation and in building understanding and mutual respect will impact on the religious leaders and thus the religious community — and by that I mean the whole community. What the Mullah

shares at Friday prayers can inflame hatred, mistrust and violence against foreign troops or it can encourage cooperation based on an accurate understanding of the mission and attitudes of those troops and their commanders. Engagement with that Mullah is therefore vital, and in this objective, the chaplain can perform a unique role.

This concept of engagement is not restricted to areas of the world where the Islamic faith predominates. Moore adds that, in any region of the world where religious observance is revered and permeates all levels of society and government, religious leaders are held in high esteem, often occupying positions of political power. He poses a question: what contribution can religious leader engagement make in these areas?¹⁵ Obviously, military chaplains can engage in ways that others cannot since the very fact of their religious affiliation and leadership is generally respected and doors are opened by this respect. Consider, for instance, the religious statistical profile of our own backyard. The nations of the Pacific are predominately actively Christian in belief and thus religious engagement in the Pacific is likely to be extremely effective.¹⁶ Add to this the burgeoning Islamic influence in Asia, where the lessons to which I have alluded can be applied, and again there is significant scope for successful religious engagement.

As we move beyond the conflict in Afghanistan and our posture as an army moves from OPGEN (operational generation) to FORCEGEN (force generation), the opportunity for chaplains to engage in religious dialogue within whatever communities we as an Army find ourselves remains. This niche capability will be a task force necessity irrespective of the type of operations in which we find ourselves engaged in the future, be that warfighting or disaster response. In this respect then, the necessity to train chaplains for religious engagement remains a significant priority for Army and a significant opportunity for the Chaplains Department. From my perspective, religious engagement has been not only a personally rewarding endeavour, but one which I believe built understanding and mutual trust with key Uruzgan-based Afghan religious leaders in both the civilian and military spheres. My hope is that this endeavour ultimately saved lives on both sides of the conflict. ■

The Author

Chaplain John Saunders serves as Padre to the 7th Combat Signals Regiment and the 136th Signals Squadron, both based at Enoggera, having formerly been chaplain to 2nd Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (2RAR), JLU-NQ, B Squadron 3rd/4th Cavalry Regiment, and the 2nd Combat Engineer Regiment. He deployed on Operation SLIPPER with 2 RAR Mentoring Task Force-3. Chaplain Saunders is an ordained minister of the Uniting Church in Australia. He is married to Jan and they have two adult children, Michael and Jessica.

Endnotes

- 1 US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication 1-05: *Religious Affairs in Joint Operations*, US Department of Defense, November 2013, p. x.
- 2 Tom Johnstone, *The Cross of ANZAC*, Brisbane, Church Archivists' Press, 2000, p. 292ff.
- 3 Ibid., pp. 283–84.
- 4 Ibid., p. 316.
- 5 Chaplain Bob Bishop interview, quoted in Michael Gladwin, 'Looking forward by understanding backward', *Australian Army Chaplaincy Journal*, December 2013, p. 103.
- 6 William Sean Lee, Christopher J. Burke, Zonna M. Crayne, *Military chaplains as Peace Builders*, A Research Report Submitted to Air Force Fellows, CADRE/AR, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, 2004, p. 3.
- 7 Ibid., p. 3.
- 8 S.K. Moore, *Military Chaplains as Agents of Peace: Religious Leader Engagement in Conflict and Post-Conflict Environments*, Lexington Books, Plymouth, UK, 2013.
- 9 Ibid., p. 10.
- 10 Ibid., p. 2.
- 11 Ibid., p. 2.
- 12 US Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Religious Affairs in Joint Operations*.
- 13 Ibid., p. III-5.
- 14 Lee, Burke, and Crayne, *Military Chaplains*, p. 7.
- 15 S.K. Moore, *Military Chaplains*, p. 2.
- 16 For example, Fiji 65%, Cook Islands 80%, Kiribati 91%, PNG 96%, Solomon Islands 96%. See Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/wfbExt/region_au.html, accessed 27 Feb 14.