Chaplaincy, Ethics, and Society: Inner and Outer Ministries for the Military Chaplaincy

Report of an International Roundtable

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An ethical challenge for political leaders, military commanders, and chaplains is to uphold freedom of religion and conscience in a democratic society, while managing the risks posed by conflicting spiritual traditions that may clash and undermine social cohesion, operational effectiveness and democratic norms. Just as secular authoritarian ideologies like fascism and communism challenge democratic norms, anti-democratic, anti-egalitarian, and coercive faith traditions can undermine public institutions.

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Sustaining inclusion and tolerance, avoiding favouritism in rhetoric or practice, and responding to religious extremism without stigmatising communities requires new strategies. While individuals in free societies enjoy freedoms of conscience, of association, and of expression, these may be nuanced or curtailed in the interests of operational effectiveness for military units. How does this work, and what do security professionals need to understand?

On 29 July, an eclectic group of interested parties met at the invitation of ISMS Secretary David Last to introduce the project launched by Austrian Chaplain Stefan Gugerel at ISMS 2024 in Stockholm.

Follow-on engagements are possible at the ISMS 2025 Annual Conference in Amsterdam, from 13 to 15 October, and at the ISME 2025, International Society of Military Ethics, Asian Conference, at the Korean Military Academy, from 16 to 17 October. ISMS Working Group 4 on Military Leadership and Working Group 5 on Military Law and Ethics will continue to engage with the subject.

Participants

Fredelle Brief has extensive experience with interfaith non-governmental organisations. Dewet Marais is a chaplain with the South African Defence Forces. Ron Bell is a Canadian Forces veteran with experience developing doctrine for the chaplaincy and is now researching ethical and legal challenges to chaplains' contributions to operations. Christine Boshuijzen van Burken is a sociologist at the Netherlands Defence Academy doing comparative research on the ethics of technology and the effectiveness of military ethics education. John Last is a journalist who has written on religion, philosophy, and politics. Eloi Gunn is the commandant of the Canadian Forces Chaplain School and wrote "Fundamentalist Religious Discourse in the Process of Radicalisation to Violence" (Canadian Military Journal, 18:2, 2018, 65-71).

The online roundtable was conducted under the Chatham House rule, which allows participants to refer to the contents of the roundtable but prohibits them from attributing remarks to individuals without permission. The views expressed were personal and do not necessarily reflect those of any institutions with which they are affiliated.

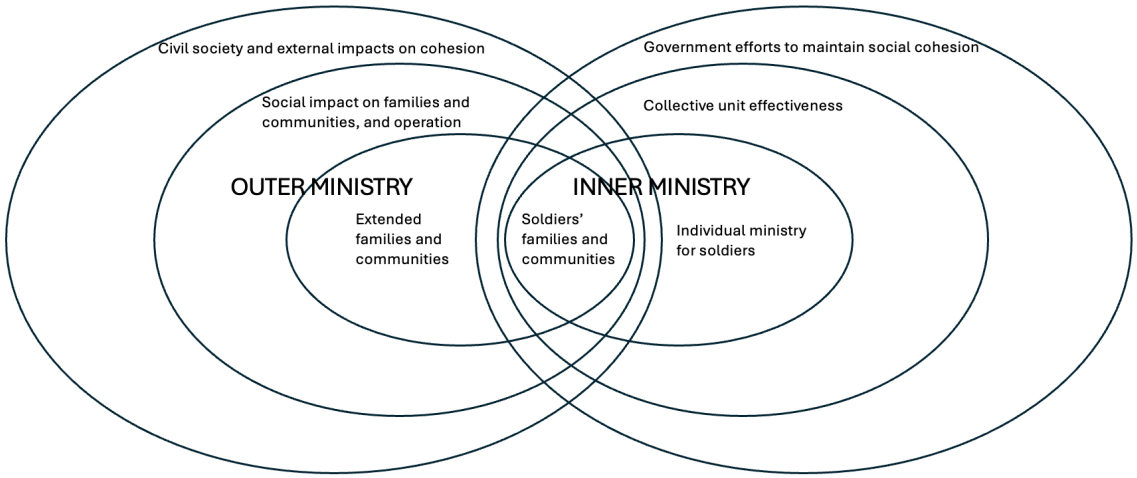
Balancing Inner and Outer, Individual and Collective Ministries

The central question concerns balancing the inner ministry (looking after service members) with the outer ministry (managing and interpreting societal schisms).

From a doctrinal perspective, the first responsibility is the inner ministry. Chaplains are deployed at the unit level, but they also work outside of the chain of command. They act as a liaison between the chain of command and the service members' families, serving as a link between internal and external ministries. Their relationship with service families goes beyond the boundaries of units. Chaplains can have a significant impact on wider society and are sensitive to changes within it. If the service member has issues at home, the chain of command has no direct path to the family environment, but the chaplain does. This active ministry allows the chaplain to work directly with the family, understand the details of the case, and advise the chain of command. But this requires more research. We know little about the influence of the chaplaincy on families. Canada's long deployment in Afghanistan (2001-2014) continued the practice of involving military chaplains in preparation for deployment and including them in both rear parties and with deployed troops; however, there is no research on their influence at the tactical level.

A related question concerns individual and collective ministries. Ministry is the spiritual care, moral guidance and religious support provided by chaplains to military personnel, their families, and units regardless of faith background. The individual ministry concerns the spiritual health of a single service member, whereas the collective ministry focuses on the health and effectiveness of units within their social context. The family and community exist in the intersection of the individual and collective ministry.

Figure 1 Intersecting Onions: Inner, Outer, Individual, and Collective Ministries



Source: Author

At one time, it could be assumed that military personnel were overwhelmingly from a common faith background, and that this shared faith could be mobilised as a source of common identity. Increasingly diverse faith backgrounds, or Spiritual/Faith Traditions (SFTs), have made it more challenging to rely on common faith traditions to build a collective unit and social cohesion.

Unit church parades, once a mainstay of military life, are still held in many countries but are no longer compulsory in most democratic countries. Religious services always have a collective dimension, both on bases and on operations. Chaplains link soldiers' experiences to the Word of God through church services, through chaplains' hours, and through personal engagement with individual soldiers during working hours, participating in range practices, parachute jumps, field exercises, and real operations to remain visible and accessible, and to share the soldiers' hardships and experiences. As religious services transition from local to national levels, they become more entwined with political influence and have a greater impact.

National ceremonies, such as Remembrance Day in Commonwealth countries, present challenges because society demands certain ways of communicating. How do chaplains respond to constraints on public discourse? The Canadian Forces Chaplain General has promulgated guidance for public ceremonies. No member of the CAF can be compelled to attend religious services or participate in religious rituals. Public ceremonies must reflect Canada's commitment to religious freedom and inclusion. Chaplains retain the right to offer religious services privately or in designated settings, but public reflections must be neutral and inclusive.

This is a constant source of tension within a multifaith chaplaincy. At every level, any ceremony that is not voluntary and occurring inside a designated setting (e.g. a chapel) must avoid religiously specific language. Canadian chaplains do not engage in public prayer, and commanders cannot order soldiers to church parades. Chaplains are encouraged to provide their own denominational services, but units and bases do not have chaplains for every denomination, so chaplains must find supporting external faith leaders or provide soldiers with the opportunity to attend outside services.

Military services are typically open to the outside community, and this is one way in which the base or unit connects with the local community. For example, about two-thirds of the participants in Friday services at Canadian Forces Base Borden are Muslims from off base. How do we use this opportunity to convey a message of peace to the public? Is there also a need for surveillance or counterintelligence to ensure that openness to society is not an opportunity for radicalisation or infiltration? Is it paranoid to consider this or naive to ignore the possibility?

In a multifaith context, individuals can find a common purpose. They don't pray together, but rather they pursue a common task together—a superordinate goal—each informed by their own faith background. When individuals enter another faith community, they do so as honest witnesses, not as participants. In the military context, these superordinate goals are clearly defined missions, executed on behalf of the state. One motto is "mission first, people always". Another is "service before self". From the commander's perspective, a soldier whose faith requirements impede operational effectiveness may be a less effective soldier, but accommodation of faith requirements is essential for recruiting and retaining soldiers and maintaining operational effectiveness. Accommodations and integration of faith requirements are necessary balances to maintain unit cohesion. The assumptions of purely secular societies may not have kept pace with changing social reality.

A Common Body of Knowledge?

Do government leaders, military commanders, and chaplains need a new body of knowledge to address the challenges of maintaining social cohesion while managing diversity?

Sociologists tell us that secondary school students today are better educated about what they can believe online, but this varies. Chaplains need to be more aware of the online influences affecting their congregations and communities. Chaplains never work in isolation; however, more transmission of knowledge between experienced and new chaplains, as well as between chaplains working in different contexts, would be helpful. Counselling training, scenario-based exercises, and shared thought experiments are all valuable tools for developing key competencies. Whenever a scandal or problem arises, military ethics gets a boost, but it is important to develop tools to prevent ethical problems. Chaplains can team up with other professionals—military lawyers, social workers, and social science researchers—to identify converging understanding of social problems and mobilise commanders and staff to act preventively.

A chaplain's handbook project could build international connections. Chaplain schools may have several relevant projects. How can technology be used in training? Can avatars provide realistic counselling feedback? Using artificial intelligence (AI) to train chaplains introduces ethical dilemmas, given the way that information is uploaded and absorbed by a growing AI engine.

From a public perspective, there may be no clear understanding of what a military chaplain does. Analogies with civilian faith leaders may be inaccurate. Just as a military doctor's task is to preserve military manpower to support the mission, a chaplain's task is to support operational effectiveness, not just the spiritual health of the individual. The Royal Canadian Chaplain Service Manual (2022) linked here provides a code of ethics and an extensive list of tasks. The strategy for employing chaplains and fostering spiritual resilience in the Canadian Armed Forces is evolving. *Called to Serve (2022-2030): Spiritual Resilience in the CAF* is an internal document with several public expressions, e.g. this web page on Spiritual Resilience in the CAF.

Are chaplains an interface between national civic ethics and religious ethics? If they have this interface role, then do they have a legitimate role in influencing communities beyond their military service? How would this role affect civil-military relations and the balance of secular society and religious expectations? Is a state role in reconciling national civic ethics with religious ethics compatible with liberal democratic values, or does it open the door to authoritarian religious nationalism, which might damage democracy?

A second question concerns the role of chaplains in a society that faces increasing atomization and a loss of community. Faith community leaders have historically played a crucial role in building community. AI and internet connectivity have a negative impact, but there is growing potential for AI to stoke new religious or cult movements. Religious leaders are often more cautious and less likely to adopt AI, and tradition can serve as a powerful antidote to futuristic ideologies. At the same time, AI tools can be attractive to therapists but also pose a threat to client privacy.

Further research is needed on operational effectiveness, moral injury, and the application of AI in daily work. Technology and rules for its use need to be designed to mitigate risks, but the preparation of chaplains to work in these fraught environments will also require investment and collaboration.

Books and resources are available from the Canadian Forces Chaplain School by contacting Commander Eloi Gunn, Commandant, at Tete.Gunn@forces.gc.ca.

Next steps

A roundtable discussion will be chaired by Stefan Gugerel at ISMS 2025 Conference, Amsterdam at 0900 on Tuesday 14 October.