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Reluctant Prophets - The Prophetic Task of Military Chaplains

Its Legitimacy and Practice

Fred van Iersel

1 Key question



This paper presents a view on the prophetic role of military chaplains as a key element in a pluralism of pastoral roles. For those who know about the International Criminal Court in The Hague, it will be clear that this is a place where justice is done after war crimes, gross violations of human rights, and crimes against humanitarian law. The ICC shows the importance of Justice in the context of warfare and other military operations. Today, I want to offer you some reflections on a theme related to your visit to the ICC, namely: what exactly does it mean when military chaplains

would take up a prophetic role within the military? Can they, should they, do they actually promote justice *in* the military and *from the side* of the military?¹

In an earlier stage of my career I worked as a chief of Roman Catholic prison chaplaincy service in this country, with 65 chaplains working under me. In this position, I can assure you, I was not always happy to be the manager of at least two or three prophetic chaplains. Why? In most cases, pastoral prophetism both in prison systems and in the military, occurs in a context of problems and even conflicts. And of course, most managers do not like problems, let alone conflicts, let alone conflicts with the organization that embeds them. Pastoral managers are no different, I guess. Most chiefs of chaplains will prefer the chaplain

¹ The point of view in this article is based on the interrelatedness of moral theology/theological ethics on one hand and practical theology on the other hand. Its focus is on the conditions under which the functioning of basic sources of religion and philosophy of life can be promoted through religious leadership, of which prophetic leadership is an important example.

to be an harmonious person, who controls his emotions - especially anger - and they will prefer a person who cooperates with his or her military commander, and who skillfully solves problems in an informal and confidential style. A pastoral prophet who starts his talk with soldiers with the words '**Thus speaks the Lord**' as the start of a confrontation, may be not quite fit to open up a process of dialogue and reflection for the commander. Instead, he causes irritation. For his prophetic speech is claiming a religious and moral authority over the audience. This moral authority is the authority of an outsider interfering in internal affairs, who seems to be standing **above** the soldiers' situation, and apparently does not share the daily burden of professional performance within the military as an organization, and whose expertise in military affairs may be doubted.

Nevertheless, this being said, we must ask ourselves if there is not more to the prophetic role of military chaplains. Today I will unfold this question, not by developing a comprehensive answer, but by illustrating some of the choices that have to be made in any pastoral practice in the military.

In this paper I offer three important sources of moral values and virtues in Western culture: first of all the Jewish Bible – especially Nathan as a prophet – , then, secondly, the Hellenistic-humanistic source of Socrates, and finally a soldier in the Christian New Testament.² They tell us three examples of prophetic military chaplaincy.

In the context of the Judeo - Christian tradition, prophecy as a concept does not imply forecasting the future. Instead, it expresses an intimate relationship between the Unspeakable and His prophet, in the context of which the prophet may utter words of the Unspeakable. The intimate relation is expressed in intense emotional terms. Often one may see four key elements in prophetic speaking, in different sequences. The first element is Gods promise: the vision of a future peace based on justice. The second element is the complaint about sin, the misbehavior of the chosen people. The third element is a conditional threat which culminates in the fourth element; an urgent appeal for conversion. More often, the prophet suffers in person by the contrast between the vision

² The texts discussed here have been analysed from the point of view of military's spiritual needs. It appeared that this perspective is almost lacking, both in biblical exegesis and in the interpretation of the quoted early dialogues ascribed to Plato.

and the present reality he addresses. He symbolically expresses the suffering of God, sometimes in the ultimate consequence of being rejected (Heschel, 2001).

In a Christian context prophetism is linked to the '*sequela Jesu*', the following of Jesus of Nazareth. All characteristics of the whole of Judeo - Christian prophetism do apply here too. But element is added to it: being a witness of Jesus Christ and his meaning as Christ (Howel, 2003).

In Socratic humanism, prophecy applies too. Socrates followed his *daimonion*, an inner voice, that especially warned him when he tended to trespass. This inner voice was his antecedent conscience, which based itself on natural law as formulated in Sophocles' play Antigone. It implies a transcendent dimension of the conscience (Vlastos, 1991).

In the context of military chaplaincy, prophetism may express itself in two basic ways: either as a Christian pacifism - a categorical rejection of war- , or as a morally strictly defensive variety of Just War Theory, including the warning for war crimes by the people to which the prophet himself belongs. This article explores the second variety (Powers 2013). It implies the option for confrontation.

2 Pictures and paintings

2.1. Nathan confronting David

The story in 2 Samuel 12 shows Nathan confronting King David ³ after David has sent Uriah to the front in order to be able to have Bathsheba as an additional wife. Nathan is the prophet confronting David with the abuse of his royal power. The parable story Nathan tells, is like a shock therapy to David, and it is effective: for David converts and repents.

Nathan's role is based on confrontation through self-clarification. He tells a story that functions as a mirror to David, namely through the method of offering him hypothetical identification with his victim.

The story Nathan tells to David clearly implies an accusation: 'David, you have committed a grave sin, by trespassing against a Divine Command and violating your moral

³ 2 Sam.12, 1-3.

responsibility towards Uriah and Bathsheba'. But, interestingly, this conclusion is left open to begin with – David may draw it himself. But when David has drawn his conclusion about the story, Nathan confronts him with a change from a merely hypothetical identification



with the victim to a realistic identification with the perpetrator in this story: 'you yourself are this man you are angry about!'

Now let us consider Nathan in his role as a military chaplain. I think this is legitimate. After all, David was not only a king, but also a general. I wonder what would happen today, in our armed forces, when a military chaplain spoke like this to a general. Would this be accepted? Or would this general say: mister chaplain, this is not what you have been

appointed for, go back to your spiritual welfare work, motivate my troops, and go provide church services for them? It's a question we must ask ourselves.

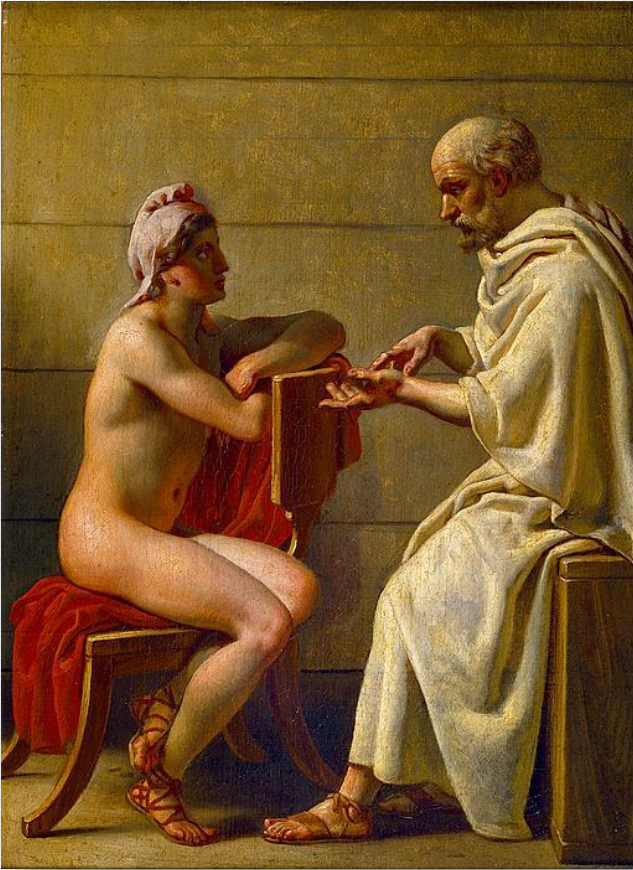
And it is not a merely hypothetical one: what happens for example when a high ranking, esteemed general violates his country's integrity codes, for instance by having a secret love affair while he is working for an intelligence service? And what about soldiers who have several marriages on different continents, or soldiers who make themselves guilty of harassment of female subordinates? Does the chaplain dare to confront? Like Nathan, the military chaplain in these cases needs courage, and of course he needs prudence in his choice of instruments, as in Nathan's case: his metaphorical narrative.

But are these virtues part of the basic pastoral attitude? Or is this basic orientation solely about providing comfort? And do you as chiefs of military chaplains esteem this type of courage, or do you rather consider it a risk for the continuity of your pastoral service? Of course it is not my intention here to discuss this as a legal issue, I am talking about the theological and philosophical concept of pastoral care, or, as the Catholic tradition has it, as 'care of souls'. Can, it, does it, should it, include prophetic self-clarification through confrontation?

2.2. Socrates confronting Alcibiades

Let us turn to the next example: Socrates (470-399 BC) confronting Alcibiades (450-404 BC) regarding his ignorance about justice in two early writings of Plato (427-347 BC). Alcibiades' abilities as a leader, a soldier and a strategist apparently are not sufficient for wisdom, especially with regard to justice. His changes of loyalties from ancient Athens to Sparta and back to Athens raise questions, too. Is Alcibiades merely an ambitious soldier striving for acknowledgment of his physical skills, his technical virtues with weapons, or his strategic insights - or does he strive for justice, and if so, what would that mean to him? The educational role of Socrates, who confronts one of the most powerful generals of his time, is a type of prophetism. Remarkably, the form it takes is not proclaiming truth but posing questions.

Don't be mistaken though: it was not always pleasant to be a partner in Socrates' dialogues. Why not? First of all, he deprives his partners from their moral certainties. And then, secondly, there is this irritating Socratic irony: one can never be sure whether



Socrates really means what he says or whether he just tests his partner's ability to analyze a wrong moral argument. In fact, for the dialogue partner, Socratic dialogue brings a deeper moral uncertainty to the surface, as a way of self-reflection, but also in public debate. Luckily, Socrates was not a sophistic ethical relativist. He kept on looking for moral truth. So in spite of his irony, his dialogues never end up in sophistic relativism.

Nevertheless, in short term this may seem to be not very practical for general Alcibiades. He becomes uncertain and his public image as a strong leader with a clear vision is at risk, too. But in the long run, I am convinced that this Socratic dialogue will have made Alcibiades an even better general. I am

also sure, however, that the latter was not the aim of Socrates: for him, the quest for understanding ethics was the most important. Again: Socrates clarifies Alcibiades' moral ignorance and leads him to self-clarification – not by accusing him, but by posing questions.

In the Dutch context, The Dutch Catholic humanist Desiderius Erasmus used exactly this method, including the irony, in one of his early writings named '*The soldier's confession*', which poses a similar question to the soldier: 'why do you kill as a soldier, and why do you think this is legitimate?'

These Socratic questions of course may be quite nasty for the military. Attempts to initiate a dialogue about these themes may seem threatening to the person's conscience, or even to the morale in the organization and the soldier's motivation – at least at first glance. But

soldiers cannot deny or avoid them. And if they succeed in avoiding them, this will be *temporarily* successful only: for their conscience will confront them once again when they are a veteran and memories can no longer be repressed. Therefore, military culture must facilitate this type of Socratic questioning. To summarize the relevance of this, I'd like to ask you: can you imagine soldiers fighting a 'just war' or conducting just combat actions in a peace operation without them having any idea about justice, or about the military's license to kill?

Now let us consider Socrates as a military chaplain *avant la lettre*. What can we learn from this important source in Western culture?

First of all: it is most important to pose questions, and to pose the right ones, for by asking these, one helps a soldier in his self-clarification. **Secondly:** the focus on self-clarification implies that the soldier himself is and will stay responsible for his own personal and professional attitudes and actions – which is a good starting point for pastoral care. **Thirdly:** although the posing of questions can really contribute to the formation of the conscience, it is not an easy job. It implies an intervention in current ways of framing military practice. Therefore, it takes skills and techniques in dialogue, so it requires a type of pastoral quality, in modern terms: professionalism. **Fourthly,** it is not without a risk to operate in this Socratic way. Even in a democracy like ancient Athens, Socrates was killed in spite of the fact that he was esteemed as a philosopher, too. He died in a way similar to a Jewish prophet⁴, refusing to escape his death penalty and by staying loyal to his inner vocation expressed in his inner voice, his so called *daimonion*. The Socratic attitude is a very demanding one.

In sum, my question to you is: can we ourselves, can our military chaplains, live and work up to this Socratic standard? Nowadays, the early Socratic dialogues may offer an important instrument for moral education, because they are helpful in aiming at transcending self-centered ambition, for transcending a lucid self-esteem, and to go beyond narrow-minded ideas on military professionalism and corporate pride. The

⁴ In western philosophy, Socrates and Jesus have been compared very often.

Socratic dialogues are helpful in seeking an honest orientation on justice as a key virtue and a key value for any military – as an individual as well as an organization.

2.3. Roman centurion under the Cross⁵

I now come to the Roman centurion expressing the meaning of Jesus – ‘truly, this man was the Son of God’ – while standing under the Cross⁶.

What I would like to point to here are some general characteristics of this text. The pagan soldier defining the victimized non-violent Jesus as just, should be considered not only as a believer, but also as a prophet. He sets an example for a prophetic role of military chaplaincy, too. In this case, the centurion is witnessing. In the context this an act of prophecy.

The **first** characteristic of this text is that precisely a soldier – one of those who use force – may see differences in religious and moral meanings of violence, and see the difference between just and unjust human persons. It is not that the Roman soldier just happens to be around when Jesus is crucified. He is one of the **executioners**, in any case he is one who knows what it is like to kill on duty. Then he looks to this victim and expresses his positive trustful attitude towards him. The point implied here is that soldiers may see very well the meaning and significance of their victims – not **in spite of** their being a soldier, but **because** they are one.

Secondly, the attribution of this positive meaning to Jesus also implies a confession of guilt to killing an innocent person. **Thirdly**: the fact that the Roman soldier expresses his faith in Jesus, also implies that the soldier violates the Roman law, for that prescribed worshipping the Roman emperor as a God. So by expressing his faith in Jesus, he also



⁵ Salvador Dalí, "Vere, hic homo iustus erat" (1967)

⁶ Mark 15: 39.

reveals that his political leader is an **idol** who should not be worshipped – which is definitely prophetic.

Fourthly, it also implies a political disloyalty towards the Roman emperor, the occupational force in Jerusalem, so the soldier's witness expresses a form of thorough disobedience.

Fifthly, it is quite remarkable that the soldier – as a Roman – witnesses his faith in a *cross-cultural* way: he dares to cross the frame of reference of his own culture.

All these aspects of this soldier's story may be relevant to military chaplains.

The **first** aspect is a clear illustration that faith and being a military may coincide, because soldiers may intuitively understand the meaning of violence. The military chaplain must avoid any sort of naïve pacifism. Instead he can build his pastoral practice on the soldiers' experiences.

Secondly, the guilt implied in playing a role in world history's violence, is quite a theme for military chaplaincy in all times. Guilt is not a popular theme in Western culture, not among civilians nor among soldiers. But it is an implication of participating in the course of history. And this may be put forward by military chaplains, too.

Thirdly, the revelation of self-idolatry of political leaders leading a war or an occupation, is a highly relevant theme for military chaplains. Happily, through the separation of church and state in modern constitutional states, military chaplains are no longer asked to legitimize politics and politicians. Responsibilities are separated. For military chaplains it opens up the possibility of a prophetic role. He or she may keep a distance from political ideology and take a role in commemorating of the suffering victims of war, and let us say: he or she may remind the soldiers that it is necessary to hope for peace and to treat every person in conformity with the dignity intrinsic to the human person. Surely, remembering the suffering and making them remembered is a prophetic task.

The **fourth** lesson to learn from this biblical narrative is that loyalty to those in power can never be absolute. There needs to be room for freedom of religion and freedom of conscience at all times. The prophetic military chaplain may safeguard this room for religious and moral freedom of the military.

In the Netherlands, military chaplaincy presupposes the separation of church and state (van Bijsterveld, 2008).⁷ Therefore chaplains do not have a military responsibility. Basically they are civilians wearing uniforms. Now the freedom involved in this, provides the freedom to act as a prophet. However, the guarantee of freedom of religion for all military implies that no soldier is legally obliged to listen to a chaplain. So here is a ground why prophetic chaplaincy does occur, but only when the background churches are participating in social and political debate, as did happen in the nuclear debate in the seventies.

Fifthly, this text may open up the chaplain's eyes for soldiers who do not belong to his own denomination, but who are open to the meaning of victimization through military practice; perhaps even more than soldiers belonging to his own denomination. In fact, it is a gift to humanity when soldiers try to understand the meaning of the use of force and its impact on victims and bystanders. A military chaplain should dare to provide prophetic guidance here.

3 Reluctant prophets

So far it would seem that a prophetic role for military chaplains may be highly attractive. But then why is it that they are not always willing to take up a role as prophet?

I think that there are six types of argument at stake here. They are based on pastoral prudence.

First there is an argument from pastoral psychology. The chaplain needs the military for his survival, so there is psychological pressure to stay a member of the group and adapt to it, and to follow the commander as the leader who is necessary for survival.

Secondly, the client system is based on completely voluntary contact with the chaplain, due to the freedom of religion and the separation of church and state. So any chaplain must answer to the challenge to provide attractive types of chaplaincy. Taking a confrontational role would increase the distance between the chaplain and the client.

⁷ Due to its cultural history The Dutch system is not based on a diversity politics, in which the government defines the common ground of religions and philosophies of life, but on a society-based 'principled pluralism', in which culture and society in its pluralism define the ethical values to be used by the state. See: Van Bijsterveld, 2008).

Thirdly, the concept of pastoral care as the main task of military chaplains is hard to combine with an educational role, in which people's acts and learning processes are judged and evaluated. In this dilemma, a military chaplain may choose to provide care without providing challenge, education and confrontation – in order to avoid a role conflict.

Fourthly, the Dutch cultural *poldermodel* has developed a double mechanism of avoiding cultural and religious conflicts (Zijderveld, 1970, 1988). The first is to not focus on the substance of a conflict but on its functioning, and to look for *procedures* to solve conflicts. In the case of a chaplain the procedure would require defining the limits of his responsibility: each person must follow his own conscience, so there is no responsibility to appeal to the military's conscience in specific circumstances.

The other mechanism is that Dutch culture has redefined itself from a dense culture with a lot of social control to a sparse culture with common but merely **general and abstract** values, combined with individual freedom (Pinto, 2000). One can observe this in the Dutch legislation on abortion and euthanasia, and in policies allowing prostitution and offering regulations for it, without combating the phenomenon itself – except in the case of human trafficking. In the context of this culture, the individual's freedom is most visible; basic values and debate are in the background, only except when strictly necessary. It may well be the case here that a practice is allowed according to law – not because the practice itself is considered as good or justifiable, but to respect freedom and promote regulation of something some people do.⁸

So in this type of cultural environment a prophetic role of military chaplains may be perceived as an illegitimate return to the 'dense' culture of our past with its social control mechanisms that limit the individual's freedom. In this perspective, a prophetic role is not very attractive for chaplains who want to avoid social isolation.

Fifthly, our constitutional state provides a guarantee for just decisions through the informal rule that 2/3 of the parliament has to support a peace operation. So the trust in political decision-making can make soldiers follow the government. Besides, the military

⁸ Elsewhere I analysed how these mechanisms interfere with tendencies towards postmodern fatalism, relativism, nihilism, pragmatism and individualism. All of these five tendencies that are present in Western culture, may threaten the military's system of meaning. See van Iersel, 2014.

as an organization functions in a chain of command, where individual freedoms are limited. So the military culture discourages a culture of following the individual conscience in military affairs.

Sixthly, the churches in this country are substantially decreasing in membership; they are no longer strong institutions with a self-evident moral authority and a social status as natural partner for the state. Even if they would consider necessary a moral conflict with the state on issues of war and peace, they are hardly able to confront it with supposedly ethically unjust policies. So military chaplains who prefer a prophetic role have to stand battle alone, not because there is something wrong with the churches themselves, but because their positions have weakened.

4 Conclusion: Telling the Truth as a Prophetic Task

At the beginning of this lecture, I told you about the hesitation a pastoral manager may have regarding prophetic types of military chaplaincy. In fact, there are grounds of pastoral prudence that support these hesitations. Nevertheless, prophetic types of chaplaincy do have a legitimacy in the main sources of Western culture. A military organization that does not allow for it, might lose its openness for moral truth in critical situations. Military chaplaincy may aim at prevention of trespasses and crimes, through its professional participation in moral education and training in the military.

But under exceptional circumstances – when there is an imminent threat of violation of human persons' dignity – a military chaplain must have the possibility to transcend the paradigm of pastoral professionalism and to act as prophet, either through confrontation in Nathan's style, through Socratic self-clarification, or through the guiding support—including witnessing - for military who are discovering the moral meaning of suffering and of their guilty participation in it.

This approach will be more acceptable when pastoral prophetism is part of a more comprehensive concept of pastoral care. Then, both the spectators and actors in the play of prophetism may give in some of their reluctance.

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Summary

This article focuses on the prophetic role of military chaplains. Both the legitimacy and the obstacles for a prophetic role of military chaplains are analyzed. This is done through exploration of three exemplary sources of Western culture: the Jewish prophet Nathan, the Greek Hellenistic philosopher Socrates confronting general Alcibiades, and a Roman soldier looking at the crucified Jesus and becoming a witness of faith.

It is argued that, in spite of the fact that military chaplains are embedded in the national military, a prophetic role is necessary and possibly fruitful, provided it is integrated in a broader concept of pastoral care.

Key words: war crime, peace, military chaplain, prophetis