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The Two-Collar Conflict

A Philosopher's Memoir of the Iraq War

Only sinners lose their souls, it's said, through evil that they do. Not Robert Shannon. Incapable of anything but good, he lost his soul through savagery that he witnessed, horrors that he saw. When you lose – or have ripped from you – the spirit that directs you, you have two options. Fight for your soul and win it back, and you'll evermore be a noble human being. Fail, and you die from loss of truth.

Frank Delaney, *Shannon*, 2009, chapter 1

It was late September 2005. I was delayed at the gate of Naval Air Station Oceana in Virginia Beach, Virginia, while my orders were checked and a pass and parking permit were issued. Oceana is the home base of the Pukin' Dogs. A sign announcing that fact is posted beside an F-14 jet fighter just inside the gate. The Pukin' Dogs, or Strike Fighter Squadron 143, is an operational fleet squadron that now flies supersonic F/A18 E's. The squadron's distinguished history is honored at Oceana. It includes service during the Korean and Vietnam wars, the Persian Gulf War, and over Bosnia. During their 2004 cruise aboard the carrier *George Washington*, the Pukin' Dogs were involved in forty sorties over Iraq, including bombing runs over Fallujah during Operation Phantom Fury, when the Marines attempted to retake the city after the failed Operation Vigilant Resolve, which had been prompted by the widely publicized murders and burnings of Blackwater mercenaries in the city in spring 2004.

I was at Oceana on that balmy early fall day for the validation of the second year of a professional development training course (PDTC) on ethics for Navy chaplains. I was a member of a small team of professors hired by a company that won the contract to teach ethics to the chaplains serving in the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard. Our team

worked for about half a year to create a weeklong course, a sequel to the PDTC on ethics we taught in 2004 for the sea service chaplains, intended to acquaint them with various virtue concepts and character development issues and to help them deal with moral conflicts and the ethical education of the troops during their deployments in the combat zones in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as at other postings.

Among the revelations in a Pentagon Mental Health Advisory Team report (MHAT-IV) on the ethics of the troops in Iraq was that only 38 percent of the Marines serving in Iraq believe that noncombatants (Iraqi civilians) are to be treated with dignity and respect. Chaplains serving with Marine units have responsibilities for ethical education in those units and are tasked as moral advisers to command. In 2004 and 2006, the PDTCs for the chaplains were dedicated to the teaching of ethics so that the chaplains might better fulfill their assignments. After our PDTC was “validated,” we would teach the PDTC on Navy and Marine bases at locations around the world, from Okinawa to Naples, Italy, from Hawaii to Norfolk, Virginia, from Camp Pendleton to Camp Lejeune.

Somewhere in the Department of Defense or the Chaplain Corps offices, the teaching team’s 2004 stint earned sufficiently high enough grades to win a second contract for the contractor that hired us, a company owned by American Indians (which, I supposed, Sitting Bull and Geronimo might have found humorous). That piece of irony was soon to be passé, however, because the company was sold twice in the course of the next year and we ended up working for General Dynamics. (There probably is something profoundly ironic in that, too.) At least the company wasn’t sold to Halliburton!

The validation process involved the team teaching the weeklong course to a select group of about forty chaplains who flew into Oceana to serve as the “beta group.” The senior ranking members of the Corps evaluated our performance and especially the content of the various segments of the course. Those on our teaching team who were in the Navy (two retired captains) and those who were on the civilian faculty at the Naval Academy – that is, all team members except for me – referred to the segments each of us created for the course as our “briefs.” When I was first told I had to present my four briefs for validation, I assumed that meant that I would give the written material in the form of Power Point slides to some mid-level officer, perhaps a lieutenant commander, who would stamp it with some code to which only a select few in the Corps and in the bowels of the Pentagon would be privy. I was not involved with the

validation process in the first year and had to be informed that I was to teach the sessions I had created in real time with the Admirals observing. That was but one of my many misconceptions or misunderstandings about the Navy way of doing and talking about things.

It was obvious to me from the beginning of my relationship with the project in 2004 that the chaplains were comfortable with the retired Navy captains on the team and to a somewhat lesser degree with those who are civilian professors at the Naval Academy. Because I had no personal connection to the Navy, I would have to earn credibility with them. That meant that I needed to learn the vocabulary of the Navy and the Marine Corps “on the run” and prove to the chaplains that in addition to knowing ethics and being able to teach it, I had a functional command of their scriptures, even though I have no religious affiliation, and could hold my own when they raised examples for discussion in the peculiar language that is Navyspeak.

In early October 2003, I was on a telephone conference call with my daughter, Dr. Shannon French, then a philosophy professor at the Naval Academy, and a retired Navy captain with whom she worked at the Academy. They informed me that they were members of a team that had constructed a syllabus for weeklong PDTCs on ethics for the chaplains. I do not know with certainty what at that time led the senior officers of the Navy Chaplain Corps to decide that the chaplains needed ethics training. A senior chaplain told me that the Pentagon had raised questions about why the chaplains were not playing a more central role in providing moral advice to command. It is, however, noteworthy that in summer 2003, the Associated Press ran a troubling story about how the Navy had punished more than forty chaplains in the previous decade “for offenses ranging from sexual abuse and adultery to fraud, a misconduct rate much higher than for other officers. . . . Most of the punished chaplains, 28 of the 42, were accused of sexual misconduct or harassment. . . . Examples: A Roman Catholic chaplain went to prison for molesting the young sons of sailors and Marines. A Seventh-day Adventist chaplain was court-martialed for an indecent assault during a counseling session. Three chaplains – a Baptist, a Catholic, and a United Pentecostal Church International minister – were punished for downloading porn onto Navy computers. . . . The regular officers had a discipline rate of two per 1,000, while the rate for chaplains was 45 per 1,000.”

Shannon had taken on the leadership duties for the team. At their course’s validation in September 2003, the senior officers of the Chaplain Corps decided that one of the original members of the team was

ineffectual. He resigned from the team when informed of that evaluation, leaving the team in a bind because the validated curriculum had to be taught by two team members at eleven locations between January and May 2004. I was asked to take over the former member's obligations by teaching at San Diego, Norfolk, and Hawaii. In the early 1970s, I had written a book on the My Lai Massacre, I had taught at Homestead Air Force Base during the Vietnam War, and I had been a college philosophy professor, mostly writing and teaching in ethics, for nearly forty years, so it was assumed that I could step in without great difficulty. I agreed to take on the assignment although I had not yet seen the syllabus I would be teaching.

The syllabus for the first (2004) ethics PDTC was, by and large, a basic ethics course, mostly a smorgasbord of moral theories interspersed and usually illustrated with military stories and military examples of moral conflict. My daughter informed me that much of the course was derived from the required ethics course that was taught at the Naval Academy to cadets in their second year. Although I did not recognize a pervasive problem with the curriculum when I first examined it, during the actual teaching it became clear that because of its primary origin, much of the discussion of the issues focused on command decisions and not on the sorts of experiences that typically confront chaplains. In retrospect, I think that may have been more of a plus than a minus because after the *pro forma* reaction of the chaplains to some of the cases – “That’s a command issue, not my problem” – we were able to elicit very candid responses to relevant questions such as “OK, but what might the situation or the command decision provoke that does fall within your scope of duty when the captain or the colonel orders X rather than Y?” or “If the commanding officer had asked for your advice when doing X was under consideration, how would you have responded?” As events in Iraq deteriorated, their responses to our attempts to engage them in such ethical dialogues became more candid and shrouded in doubt and inner turmoil.

The two team members assigned to a particular base or Marine camp divided up the teaching assignments or briefs during the week. There were a few team-taught segments but, by and large, it was a single team member holding forth for a session and then sitting in the back of the room, frequently with an admiral and almost always with a captain or commander, observing the next session. Team members generally taught the sessions they had created, but that left many sessions each week that had to be taught by a team member who did not develop it. Insofar as

I had nothing to do with the creation of the Power Point slides (a Navy requirement) for each session, nor had I ever taught the material in the way it was formatted, it was decided that, wherever possible, I should teach the briefs that presented some of the more standard ethical positions such as Kantianism and utilitarianism. Sticking just to the major historical theories, however, would not suffice to my pulling my weight during the week, so I also was assigned to teach briefs on moral motivation, cultural and moral relativism, divine command theory, conflicts of duty, just war theory, truth telling, and moral numbing. Each of the sessions lasted for approximately an hour, but some were longer and one or two were only forty-five minutes or so.

After each session, the chaplains got a fifteen-minute break during which most would tank up on coffee and doughnuts in the morning and soft drinks and various geedunk – unhealthy snacks – in the afternoon. After a few of the PDTCs, someone in the higher command of the Corps insisted that more healthful food also be provided, and a plate of raw veggies appeared. After the first day, some of the chaplains would also use the breaks to approach me and the other instructor with questions. Their questions, however, frequently were not about the material we had just covered. They typically related incidents they had experienced, or “had heard that another chaplain had experienced,” in country. They wanted to know if they had done the right thing when they (or the mythical chaplain of their stories) had responded to the situation in the manner they did. In the first PDTC that I taught, the stories were more or less standard wartime occurrences regarding whether a report on an incident should have been sent up the chain to higher command or whether a counseling session with the chaplain was sufficient. Later in my “tour of duty,” the stories became more and more horrific, and the chaplains telling them became less concerned about disguising their involvement and their deep moral concern that something very bad was happening to them and to their moral, if not religious, status. Into the second year, 2006, their concerns became more desperate and personal and revealed significant psychological and moral damage to what one chaplain referred to as his “immoral immortal soul.”

My first assignment in January 2004 was at the Anti-Submarine Warfare Training Center at Point Loma, San Diego, with a class of almost 100 chaplains. That was after the first wave of success the U.S. troops experienced following the invasion of Iraq. The slog of occupation was setting in. It was, however, before virtually everything in Iraq failed to follow the blueprints the architects of the war in the Bush administration

had drawn and the ill-informed pundits in the media had enthusiastically supported. Luckily, or maybe by design, I was teamed with my daughter, who not only had years of experience in teaching much of the specific material in the PDTC but also had a good grasp of the jargon of the sea services. She took on the first few sessions, starting promptly at 7:30 AM every day, while I observed and tried to gather as much information about how to get a handle on the material for this group of “students” as I could, realizing that I would have to teach many of the sessions she was covering when she was not with me in Norfolk and at Pearl Harbor.

The week began with our being introduced to the chaplains by the captain in charge, the OSTM (on-sight training manager), as the SMEs (pronounced “smeees”), only the beginning of what seemed like an endless parade of acronyms. What the hell is a SME? The name drew to my mind creatures from an old Al Capp cartoon, little white globular alien things with stumpy legs and no arms and small black eyes. Perhaps to many of the chaplains that was exactly how we were perceived: the more or less lovable and selfless shmooos. The chaplains, hopefully affectionately but maybe facetiously, often used such expressions as “Here come the SMEs” and “Watch out for the SMEs.” I remembered that it was the fate of the shmooos (or shmooon – the preferred plural) in the *Lil Abner* cartoon strip to destroy human society because humans stopped working and took full advantage of the unlimited supply of shmooon, whose *raison d’être* was to sacrifice themselves for the comfort and happiness of humans. The shmooon had to be exterminated to save the human race from its own predilection to lie about idly and avail itself of the benefits bestowed on it by such creatures. I worried that we SMEs could well be the Chaplain Corps’ shmooon, and that led me to wonder what the acronym really stood for. I tried out a number of possibilities while my daughter taught the introductory session, but nothing seemed to fit the bill. Then I dug out the orders we received from the Chief of Chaplains that get us through the tight security at the bases and it jumped out at me: we were referred to as “subject matter experts” – SMEs! Of course!

Almost immediately at Point Loma it became evident that there was a very wide range of academic backgrounds and intellectual interest represented by the chaplains gathered in the room. Some of their responses, when they did respond to my daughter’s questions and invitations to engage in the discussion, suggested less than excited and certainly not enthusiastic intellectual curiosity. On the other hand, some were highly stimulated to explore the issues and to identify ways they might incorporate the material being taught when they returned to their units. Why

was there such a divergence of intellectual rigor and analytic capacity in the group? At an early break, I inquired of the OSTM, who was keeping everything running shipshape on a tight schedule, about how someone gets to be in the Navy Chaplain Corps.

He informed me that the Pentagon has a committee, the Armed Forces Chaplains Board, that determines which religions are legitimate and thus rate having chaplains in the military. A look at their decision on Wicca suggests that they tend to accept judicial and IRS decisions as guiding their inclusion of a religion on the list. There are more than 100 recognized religions, the most recent, at least at that time, being Wicca. But not every religion has a chaplain in the service. Wicca does not, but in a recent legal case, a Wicca family won the right to have their son's gravestone in a military cemetery decorated with the five-pointed star in a circle that is the symbol of the Wicca religion. The majority of chaplains represent the traditional religions and denominations: Roman Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, and the like. There are a few Jewish chaplains, one of whom was an admiral, and I met one Muslim. Some less well-known religions are also represented in the Corps, including the Native American Church.

A would-be chaplain must meet certain requirements before being admitted to chaplain training. He or she must have a baccalaureate degree of not less than 120 semester hours from a college or university listed in the *Directory of Postsecondary Institutions* and have successfully completed three years of resident graduate study in theology from a school listed in the *Directory of Postsecondary Institutions*, the *Association of Theological Schools Bulletin*, the *Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools Directory*, or a graduate school whose credits are accepted by a school listed in one of those directories. The aspiring chaplain must also be ordained by and have the ecclesiastical endorsement of one of the recognized churches. Given those educational criteria, there is little wonder that the intellectual interest level and the academic backgrounds of the chaplains in the room ranged from those who had undergone rigorous studies at Catholic seminaries and Jewish yeshivas to those with degrees from Bible Colleges and fundamentalist conservative Christian seminaries with very narrow curricula. In my early years as a college philosophy professor, I taught large undergraduate courses in which the academic abilities of the students varied dramatically, but I could not recall teaching such a radically diverse group in terms of academic preparation as those chaplains, even though, unlike the college freshmen, they all shared the same career or calling (as many of them would say).

Recognizing the source of my concern, the OSTM was quite blunt with me. “You’re wondering about the diversity in the room? Not like your graduate philosophy seminars, is it?” I agreed with a nod. “Well, that’s not all. We get a certain kind of clergy in the Corps. They’re rather different from most of the parish priests and ministers you might have met.” I recall chuckling as I looked out on a room in which maybe a third of the chaplains were dressed in Marine desert camouflage uniforms and boots and the rest were in stiffly pressed khaki uniforms with mirror-polished black or brown shoes. He went on, “Most of them would be disasters in a church where they had to carry out the regular parish duties of a minister, managing the church’s activities and business dealings. Their faith groups are more than willing to send them to us. Some are former combatants who did their tours in the Navy, the Marines or the Army, got religion, went to seminaries, got an ecclesiastical endorsement, and joined us. Each of them has a story as to how he or she ended up in the Corps. It’s not a bad life, most of the time, with assignments at bases all over the world. We have the highest retention rate in the services. Of course it’s not so good during a war.” Of course, we were in the middle of two wars!

Meeting the entry criteria, the would-be chaplain undergoes ten weeks of basic training at Newport, Rhode Island. Four courses comprise the training. The first six weeks is Naval Chaplains Basic Course (NCBC), followed by one week on Naval leadership (DOC), a one-week Amphibious Expeditionary course (AMEX field exercise), and finally a two-week course on Tools, Empowerment, and Ministry Skills (TEAMS). Those first six weeks are to get the chaplain recruits in physical shape, the other four acquaint them with the sea services and protocol, and offer ministerial training with special relevancy to the sorts of duties they will undertake in the Navy, the Marine Corps, or the Coast Guard. Upon completion of the training course, they graduate as lieutenants junior grade. Chaplains can rise in the ranks to admiral. I met four admirals in the Chaplain Corps while working this assignment.

Each morning’s PDTC session began with a nonsectarian prayer offered by one of the chaplains, and each afternoon session closed with another prayer. The Navy requires that all prayers offered up by chaplains at public functions be nonsectarian. Chaplains are not required to give public prayers, but if they do, they must conform to the Navy’s policy. After observing the ritual on the first day and the second morning, I pulled the OSTM aside during a break and rather bluntly asked, “To whom was the chaplain praying this morning?” For a moment, he stared

blankly at me, then he responded, “God.” “Some general god, or the god of his religion?” “Oh, I see what you’re asking,” he responded. “You don’t think a prayer can be nonsectarian.” “I don’t claim to know much about theology, but it is worth thinking about,” I said. He acknowledged that to be true and that he didn’t really approve of the practice, but it was Naval regulations. I carried the issue a step further by suggesting that the exercise might be blasphemous to some and a violation of one of the Ten Commandments to others. He responded that some chaplains had made such a complaint about the practice, but it was always good to offer thanks to and ask for guidance from God. “So,” I followed up, “you all really believe in the same god? Allah, Yahweh, Brahma, Vishnu, all the same? And what about the nontheistic Buddhists?” He smiled. “No, they are not the same.” He was anxious to get away from this discussion and see to the refilling of the coffee urn, but I pushed him one step further. “You’re a Lutheran. When you give the prayer, are you praying to the Christian god, even though you don’t mention that or end with something like ‘in the name of Christ we pray’?” He admitted that was what he thought he did. “So your prayer isn’t really nonsectarian.” He hesitantly nodded, then dashed off to tend to his organizational duties. I wondered if I would get a call from the company that employed us telling me that my services were no longer required, that I had carried my philosophical curiosity too far. But that call never came.

At the next break, that OSTM approached me again. “Your question about the prayer,” he started. “I suppose it is not really a prayer at all unless each of those praying is in his or her mind addressing it to the god of his or her faith group. I think that is what each of us is doing in the room.” “But isn’t that a problem for you then? It isn’t really a nonsectarian prayer, and, well, if you don’t believe that the other guy’s god really exists, can he be praying? He is certainly not praying to your god, the one and only true god, as you understand it.” “Yes, it is one of the problems with the pluralistic environment of the Chaplain Corps. Our Code of Ethics maintains that we work collegially with chaplains of religious bodies other than our own and respect the beliefs and traditions of our colleagues.” I acknowledged that I had read their Code of Ethics and that I wondered how the line in it that says that chaplains serve God and country is meant to be understood. He smiled, “Pluralistically, I suppose.” A number of chaplains were, like the OSTM, intellectually and spiritually aware of the thin line they walked between being the pastoral representatives of their faith groups and being commissioned officers in the Navy.

This became much more obvious to me during teaching sessions at every subsequent PDTC during the two years in which I was involved in the project. On the right collar of the chaplain's uniform is the insignia of military rank. On the left collar is the insignia of the chaplain's faith – a cross, a tablet, a crescent, or a Dharmacakra. At virtually every PDTC, at least one chaplain would point to his two collars during the discussion of an ethical issue related to some military situation that had struck very near to home. That action was the universal symbol in the Corps that expressed the schizophrenic nature of their jobs. Sometimes it would be referred to just by the words, "two collars." During a session at Pearl Harbor, one of the chaplains expressed it as "I preach love and forgiveness and mercy and respect for other people while I work for an organization that sees itself as having only two jobs: to kill people and destroy property. How do you like that, Dr. French?"

There is an ongoing internal conflict in the Chaplain Corps between those from fundamentalist evangelical Christian churches and those representing the liturgical Protestant and Catholic churches. It raised its head during my second PDTC, at the Little Creek Amphibious Base in Norfolk, Virginia, in late March 2004. During the session on Kantianism, I was asked point blank by an older chaplain to explain how the history of promotions in the Corps could be ethical. Weren't they being treated as means and not as ends? I must have looked befuddled. I was clueless. He smiled slyly and said something to the effect that "they must not have told you about that." I looked to my colleague to see if he had any idea about what the chaplain was referring to. He shook his head. I tried to move past the question, or rather around it, giving it what they would say was a wide berth. However, another chaplain from the sullen group in the back row, one who had been silent up to that point and who seemed bored with the whole PDTC, piped up by seconding the question and saying it was something that definitely required ethical examination. Why was I shirking it? "After all, what's the point of this PDTC?" I said I would look into it, but the topic of that session was deontic ethics. The mumbling from the back row became more of a rumble. The senior chaplain who was serving as the OSTM for this PDTC cut in and told the chaplains to stay on topic. Dutifully they complied.

I sought out the questioner during the next break and asked him to fill me in. He kept a wary eye out for the OSTM while telling me that he and a significant number of his fellow evangelical chaplains, serving and retired, were party to a class action suit to move more of their number up in the ranks and into command positions in the Corps. He told me