



## **The Church, Military Forces and Humanitarian Identity in War**

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“Do not think that it is impossible for anyone serving in the military to please God.” So wrote St. Augustin in his famous letter to Boniface, the military Governor of the Roman province of Africa in 418 AD.<sup>1</sup> Like many other Christians in the centuries that followed him, Augustin was in no doubt that soldiers could serve God. He felt sure that bearing arms and committing violent acts in war does not necessarily put soldiers in a separate and especially sinful category of person. They remain human beings, precious to God and able to please Him. Indeed, Augustin believed that, at their best, soldiers can be human beings with a very special calling and responsibility as instruments of God’s will. Drawing on John the Baptist, he makes clear that the mark of such a calling is the particular combination of violence and mercy.<sup>2</sup>

I think it is important to make this statement at the outset of any discussion about relations between humanitarian professionals and military people because the great question in this relationship for humanitarians turns upon a very legitimate anxiety about difference and distinction between them and soldiers. Such humanitarian fear is not unreasonable and seems to be of two main kinds. First, there is the fear around perception and identity. This is the concern that others might see an agency’s identity as being associated with one particular warring party and so make them their enemy as a result. This is a fear akin to that of contagion – that their proximity to a particular party might mean they catch the enmity bestowed on that party by another. Secondly, there is the fear of cooption and assimilation – that the power of certain groups in the conflict as donors or governing authorities will effectively overpower them and use them for their own particular purpose.

In order to prevent these very real risks of mistaken or assimilated identity, humanitarian agencies are increasingly insistent that they are different from military

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<sup>1</sup> Letter 198, to Boniface, in Tkacz et al (1994) Augustine: Political Writings, Hackett, Indianapolis.

<sup>2</sup> Augustin, like many after him, draws on the words of John the Baptist to a group of soldiers in Luke 3:14 “Terrorise noone, accuse noone falsely and be content with your pay”.

organisations in any given war.<sup>3</sup> As required by their Code of Conduct, humanitarians want to show that they are impartial, independent and take no side in the conflict concerned. Humanitarians often emphasize this difference by suggesting that soldiers are in a very different group or category from their own humanitarian group. This is certainly true. But it is important that humanitarians are careful about how they set about determining the extent of such difference.

In this talk, I will mix a little theology and social psychology to think about how we shape ideas about identity, our own and that of others, when we discuss humanitarian-military relations in armed conflict. But first, let me say, that I tend to agree with most of the current policy papers on the subject emerging from OCHA, the ICRC and the wider NGO community. Indeed, I find the Caritas paper particularly clear and practical! All these papers focus clearly on the importance of different roles, separate identities, and responsible liaison while clearly embracing the principles of civilian best interest and last resort in the most extreme circumstances which obviously demand direct military involvement in humanitarian action.

My purpose today is not to take issue with these operating principles but to alert us to the fact that any process of inter-group comparison and contrast must be handled with care. If all goes well, such comparison can lead to accurate and healthy definitions of one another which represent the facts and enable good and appropriate relations. If not, such a process can lead to a misrepresentation of each group and construct false or simplistic images of one another that can become entrenched and hard to resist. The latter scenario does not usually make for a functional or appropriate relationship.

### **Three Categories, Many Groups**

Most discussions to date of humanitarian-military relations have been dominated by discussion of two groups: military forces and humanitarian agencies. But, of course, the whole issue is really about intergroup relations between three groups: military forces, humanitarian agencies and the civilian population.<sup>4</sup> In fact, these are better described as general *categories* and within them there are many groups. There are usually several armed forces, many humanitarian agencies and several factions within the civilian population in any given conflict. So whether it be Iraq, Afghanistan, Liberia or Bosnia, the usual context for humanitarians is one of complex inter-group relations.

Apart from a legal concern to abide by international humanitarian law in their dealings with various armed forces, humanitarian agencies are most practically concerned by the question of how their relations with one of these groups affects their relations with another. In particular, they are worried about how their relationship with one armed force will be perceived by another. Or, they are concerned about how the civilian population will perceive their relations with a particular armed force and, vice versa, how one armed force will perceive their relationship with a section of the civilian population. Getting these inter-group relationships right is important because

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<sup>3</sup> This is in stark contrast to many agencies in World War II who wore khaki and slotted in beside the Allied advance, liberation and occupation of Europe. Many Quaker Ambulance Units worked directly with military forces although some were unusual by insisting on wearing grey not Khaki.

<sup>4</sup> Stephanie Knell, MSc Dissertation, Oxford Brookes University 2003.

getting them wrong can mean that humanitarians can be rejected by armed forces and by the civilian population itself. The challenge of relations with the military is, therefore, a three-way problem that is made more problematic by the existence of different groups within each of the three main categories.

## **Inter-Group Strategies**

The conventional humanitarian response to these difficult inter-group relations and their very real problems of perception, contagion and assimilation is well described by three other ideas from social psychology: identity; superordinate goals, and the contact hypothesis<sup>5</sup>.

As we have seen, most humanitarian policy papers recommend affirming a distinct and separate *humanitarian identity* to differentiate them from all armed forces. This is intended to reassure armed forces and the civilian population alike.

Secondly, humanitarian organizations seek to transcend inter-group conflict by the classic idea of setting what psychologists call a *superordinate goal* that all groups can recognize as a common interest. For example, a desperate priest may try and unite a squabbling parish by setting everybody's sights on renovating the church. This then allows them to set aside their differences in pursuit of this common goal. Humanitarians try and convince all parties to share in the superordinate goal of respecting universal humanitarian values of restraint and protection in war. This enables humanitarians to distance themselves from the particular political interests of the conflicting parties and to forge an equal relationship with all parties on the basis of a single issue.

Finally, what psychologists know as *the contact hypothesis* suggests that regular personal contact between conflicting groups can diminish conflict and change perceptions. As a result, humanitarians always seek out direct and sustained personal contact with all the various groups in a conflict so as to persuade them of their distinct identity and the integrity of their superordinate humanitarian goal. Their inability to make such contact with the armed groups currently attacking them most in Iraq and Afghanistan is therefore a major crisis for them.

These three inter-group strategies are all closely linked. While they are important strategies to pursue, I also wonder whether they do not produce certain risks for church-based agencies like Caritas members. The rest of the paper therefore looks at the dangers of a possible excess in humanitarian differentiation, an over-emphasis on a super-ordinate humanitarian goal and a simplistic form of contact with civilian communities.

## **Dangers in Differentiation**

There seem to me to be three particular dangers in any process of inter-group differentiation that seeks to assert a distinctive identity :

1. Too rigid categorization of the out-group;
2. Stereotyping of the out-group,
3. The tendency of the in-group to construct a skewed version of its own identity as it strives to distinguish itself from the out-group.

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<sup>5</sup> In this section I am drawing on Rupert Brown, *Group Processes*, Blackwells, 2000.

In short, I want to suggest that when we humanitarians, like any group of people, seek to assert what makes us different from another group, we run the risk of caricaturing not only the other group but ourselves. In many terrible ways, we have seen this happen in the construction of extreme nationalism or politicized ethnicity when different groups feel threatened by one another. For a variety of reasons, humanitarians rightly feel threatened by military groups in many places and we must therefore be careful and nuanced as we describe the military and ourselves in these threatening environments so as not to slip into extreme positions ourselves.

- **Simplistic Categorisation of the Military**

The first risk we run is by using the simple term “military” to cover what in reality is a wide variety of different types of soldier and many different moralities of soldiering. To be fair, many humanitarian policy papers do recognize this variety and assume a plural understanding of “militaries” rather than the singular idea of a monolithic military category. But in the main, they emphasise a diversity of *role* within the conflict, either as an armed group, government force, peacekeeping force or occupying force. They do not primarily distinguish difference on the basis of military *morality* and the way different militaries conduct war. Such a distinction is, I assume, very important to Caritas – certainly as important as the role a force may play.

To counter the risk of a simplistic categorization of military forces by general type or by operational role, it is therefore very important to recognize moral differences between militaries and within armed forces. In other words, it seems vital to recognize many types of soldier in the general military out-group.

To illustrate such differences, it might be useful to take a brief look at four different types of soldier known to Jesus in the gospels. Jesus lived in a society that was under imperial military rule and he was executed by that same power. Similar conditions exist for many people today whether they are in Chechnya, Iraq, the Palestinian Territories or parts of countries like Colombia, Indonesia, Nepal, Burma, Sudan and DRC where de facto military rule by armed groups or government forces is a constant source of violence, fear, displacement and impoverishment.

In the gospels, Jesus encounters three different type of soldier and has a near miss with a fourth. The near miss is with the near-genocidal soldiers of King Herod who carry out his orders to slaughter all children under two years old in the Bethlehem area as a punitive massacre for the newborn Jesus’ escape (Matt 2 v16). The military leader who would give such an order and the soldiers who would carry it out are obviously one particular type who use military force to perpetrate deliberate atrocity and instill widespread terror.

As a second type, early in his ministry Jesus encounters a Roman Centurion who has a deep affection for his dying Jewish servant and an instinctive faith in Jesus as a person of great goodness and divine authority (Luke 7 vv1-10). Famously, Jesus’ does not criticize the Centurion for his military profession but instead sees him for his humanity and faith and responds by healing his servant and offering the Centurion as a model of faith to his disciples.

The third type of soldier Jesus encounters are those of the governor's guard who viciously torture and mock him as a prisoner before his crucifixion (Matt 27 vv27-31). These soldiers show the uninhibited cruelty and scapegoating that can emerge when circumstance, racism, sadism, peer pressure and conformity coincide to take possession of a troop of men.

Finally, at the moment of his death on the cross, Jesus has a profound effect upon another Centurion who is overseeing the executions. (Luke 24 v47, Matt 27 v54). This man is deeply challenged by what he has seen while doing his duty as a soldier and is changed by it.

I'm sure that many of you and the people you try to help have come across these four different types of soldier. Their differences mean that how you deal with them depends more on their military morality than on the simple fact that they are military. I imagine that the key point for you and for the civilian communities you work with will be whether your civil-military relations are with centurions or torturers. I think this is an important point. Our commitment to impartiality and neutrality tends to make our current policy papers see a moral equivalence in "the military" which we do not experience in practice and which we cannot accept as Christians. This false equivalence makes us pretend that civil-military relations are simpler than they actually are. Jesus certainly did not have a simple well regulated relationship with "the military" in his life and death. I doubt that we can expect one either.

- **Stereotyping**

If there is a humanitarian tendency to think in overly simple and morally neutral terms about the military, there is probably also a tendency to stereotype them. Psychologists understand three main forms and functions of stereotyping: it legitimizes existing beliefs; it confirms expectations, and creates self-fulfilling prophecies. There is perhaps evidence of all these in humanitarian approaches to different military forces.

Humanitarians may stick too rigidly to particular beliefs and expectations about the intentions and motivations of military forces. For example, in the occupation of Iraq, many humanitarian agencies and Iraqi civilians find it hard to credit coalition forces with simple compassionate motives. They also tend to discount the integrity of the longer term moral goals which coalition forces profess as the purpose of their invasion and occupation. Many soldiers may in fact believe in both and seek to act on them. In the Israeli occupation of Palestinian Territories, many humanitarians and Palestinians find it hard to sustain a nuanced view of Israeli soldiers. When policies of closure and house demolition are so drastic, it seems hard to avoid stereotyping all Israeli soldiers as extremists who care nothing for civilian life.

The tendency to stereotype under pressure is enormous but it makes for a bad basis for inter-group relations between civilians, humanitarian agencies and military forces. It prevents individuals on either side from being themselves and able to reveal a range of moral attributes across the full range of their humanity. If someone believes I am bad and expects me to be bad, then the chances are I will be bad or, even if I am good, he will read me as being bad.

The powerful aspect of Jesus' relations with military people is that he did not pre-judge them but met each one of them for who they were. In doing so, he discovered four different types of soldier. In his presence, all had the chance to be themselves and to change when confronted by the cross.

- **Caricaturing Humanitarian Identity**

Another of the risks we all face when we start defining ourselves over against another person or group is that we skew our own identity in the process to prove a point. In any process of comparison, when we caricature others we also tend to caricature ourselves. For example, if I am trying to distinguish myself from someone I believe is greedy, I not only over-emphasise their greed but tend to over-emphasise my generosity in the process of comparison.

I have a concern that as humanitarians protest their difference from military forces, many groups may do so by simplifying their own identity, minimizing their goals and limiting the kind of contact they have with suffering communities. This may be good tactics in pragmatic identity management but it might mean you lose an important part of yourself as an organisation. It might mean you stop being true to yourself in some areas. Such caricature may be particularly dangerous for faith-based organizations like Caritas who are much more than simple humanitarian organizations.

As signatories of the Code of Conduct, Caritas members are bound by the humanitarian ideals of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. But, as Christians, you are, above all, committed to the gospel. There is much in humanitarian principles that rings true to the gospel but the challenge of the cross is also much greater than humanitarian action alone. By emphasizing an over-riding humanitarian objective as supreme in your work in war (the strategy of a superordinate goal) you may relegate other moral and religious values that are central to your faith and your mission as a church. For example:

- If you talk only the language of humanitarian principle, access and need, you might subordinate the role you have as a church to hold fast to the gospel in the midst of violence as a personal challenge to people about who they are and what they do.
- If you take up the kind of inviolable humanitarian identity of neutrality and independence that demands particular respect and chooses when and where it is safe to work, you might elevate yourself above the communities you profess to serve as a church and insulate yourself from sharing in the suffering of your brothers and sisters in Christ.
- If you have only minimal humanitarian-style contact with civilians and armed forces, you might be neglecting and eroding that deeper pastoral contact and spiritual accompaniment to which Christ calls you in your relations with the poor and suffering.

- If you use an overly virtuous humanitarian identity to separate yourself and your morality too far from people fighting in military forces then you are in danger of implying (and even believing) that you are more righteous, and that they are more sinful and less loved by God.
- If you talk only of (superordinate) humanitarian goals and never engage with the deeply contested interests and agonies of the parties to a conflict then you cannot expect to have the depth of shared experience and understanding to be part of the forgiveness, healing and resurrection in individuals and society that Christ expects of you as a Church.

### **Humanitarian Discipleship**

The season of Advent which we have just begun, asks that we reflect upon the two comings of Christ. At the second coming, Christ will judge the world and Advent is thus a time for us to think about how we will be judged for who we are and what we do in this life.

In His first coming in the incarnation, we are blessed with the example of Jesus as a model of the godly life on earth. The distinguishing feature of this life was that he came fully amongst us. Strangely, his approach to life was rather different to many contemporary humanitarians. He did not ask for any special space in which to operate apart from the political realities of the world. Neither did he spend much time comparing himself to those around him to prove that he was different. He seldom pre-judged whole categories of person but instead met everyone for who they were. More often than not, He cared for people and healed them in contradiction to the rules of the day rather than by sticking to the legal norms. Above all perhaps, he stayed close to others who were suffering and then finally suffered with them.

This approach to life is deeply challenging to a humanitarian today because it is all mixed up. It is distinguished by living things as they are rather than trying to order them as they might be. It does not try to make a science out of living but an art – one that is based on love, forgiveness, the cross and resurrection. As I think of Caritas' various inter-group relations in war-torn countries, I find myself leaning towards the idea that humanitarian discipleship is probably more about being in the middle of things as they are instead of trying to argue for distinct identities, particular mandates and separate roles. I have a feeling that if the church is primarily and truly the church in any war then it will be better understood by all groups than if it tries to identify itself as a humanitarian agency.

HS/3<sup>rd</sup> December 2003