



Chaplain (Captain) James Johnson, USN, presents gift to Supreme Patriarch of Thailand during exercise Cobra Gold, in Bangkok, Thailand, February 12, 2018 (U.S. Navy/Ian Kinkead)

# Rightsizing Our Understanding of Religion

By Wayne A. Macrae

**T**he world of religion consists of various belief systems that influence humanity in numerous

ways. Religion is global. It is powerfully influential everywhere that the joint force currently operates and extends to every corner of the globe. Religion is part of the fabric of every nation—including those that take a position against it. For governments that identify as secular or atheist, religion

remains a present factor that they work to account for or control both internally and externally. Every government invests time and energy in controlling, influencing, or seeking to exist alongside religion.

In recent years, religious boundaries have begun to shift as immigration has surged, creating more overlap, interaction, friction, conflict, and competing interests of diverse influences. Understanding the interchange among intersecting religious dynamics, strategic theater goals, plans, and military operations is at the heart of global integration; this is particularly true when considering the presence of religion throughout the “gray zone” between peace and war and the major role of religious dialogue in messaging to and influencing adherents. This article advocates for a strategic approach to religion and the role of the

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chaplain in representing it to the commander. The article also considers the dynamics and growing impact of religion, how nations interact with it, U.S. military interaction with religion, and how the U.S. military could account for that role through the utilization of religious affairs staff sections.

The world's main religions have been present for thousands of years—a feat no government present today can boast. Philosophies and ideologies likewise come and go, though they may leave their mark on religion for a time. Religion has influenced cultures throughout history, and, frankly, it would be a denial of history to expect the influence of religion to cease in the future. History attests to the great resilience of religion and to the role it plays in regional trends and geopolitics.

Religion is a key influencer in the cultures and practices of many allies, unified action partners, and enemies. While Western European and North American culture may regard religion as being personal and private, most regions of South America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia view religion and religious figures as key influencers within society, with the topic of religion itself regarded as corporal and public. For the vast majority of people, religion and religious faith informs not only how they view their world but also how they live their daily lives and respond to the institutions around them.

The Western cultural bias toward the place of religion creates a blind spot that causes many in the West to minimize the role and importance of religion in other societies. As Chaplain Paul Wrigley, Naval Academy graduate and former naval aviator, stated:

*An operational commander, however well trained in the military issues, who is ignorant of or discounts the importance of religious belief, can strengthen his enemy, offend his allies, alienate his own forces, and antagonize public opinion. Religious belief is a factor he must consider in evaluating the enemy's intentions and capabilities, the state of his own forces, his relationship with allies, and his courses of action.*<sup>1</sup>

## The Growing Impact of Religion

Research paints the picture of a steadily increasing global majority holding to a religious faith and identification. According to a Pew Research report, population trends indicate a continued increase in faith among the major religions, while nonreligious populations continue to decline. Current estimates are that 84 percent of the global population follows a religious faith; by 2050, 87 percent of the global population could adhere to religious faith.<sup>2</sup> According to the same report, much of this growth is projected to take place within the following regions:

- Asia-Pacific, with 21.8 percent projected growth in major religious groups
- Latin America and the Caribbean, with 26.9 percent projected growth
- Middle East and North Africa, with 72.7 percent projected growth
- Sub-Saharan Africa, with 130.9 percent projected growth.<sup>3</sup>

These regions correspond to U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, U.S. Southern Command, U.S. Central Command, and U.S. Africa Command, respectively. These four commands are geographic combatant commands (CCMDs) that provide command and control of military forces in peace and war.

### Strategic Approaches to Religion

As noted in the 2017 National Security Strategy, the United States views the freedom of religion as a fundamental individual liberty and remains committed to supporting and advancing religious freedom.<sup>4</sup> This is a foundational principle of our Republic and acknowledges a key reality of governmental dynamics. All governments develop approaches for dealing with religion or religions. There may be one principle—such as the U.S. stance on religious freedom—or there may be several approaches, depending on which religion is the focus of attention. The relationship between governments and religions are often dynamic and changing. When we consider the challenges identified in our National Defense Strategy, we cannot help but note that those groups who pose external threats

exhibit efforts to oppose or control religion and religious expression.<sup>5</sup>

Russia uses religion, as expressed through the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), as an instrument of national soft power. Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin positions himself as the protector of Christian Orthodoxy cast against a secular West that has lost all moral sensitivity and direction. According to Jack Dulgarian:

*The Kremlin has given the ROC the spotlight in its state-sponsored media, stressing the importance of Orthodox Christianity to contemporary Russian life. It is closely related to Putin's effort to portray himself as a vanguard of traditional, conservative values. On major Christian feast days, Putin and prominent Russian politicians are regularly shown lighting candles inside grandiose cathedrals, as well as in small village churches—serving to cement the image of church-state unity.*<sup>6</sup>

It also is Russia's practice to construct Orthodox churches among Russian minority populations as centers for unity, identity, and influence—and as potentially destabilizing outposts in nations bordering Russia.

China is politically atheistic and seeks to control or limit religion. Open-media sources report significant crackdowns on various religious groups, particularly the Muslim Uighur population in the western province of Xinjiang. The Chinese government strives to be in control of religion. As Thomas Harvey notes:

*In the history of the People's Republic of China, President Xi Jinping is the first paramount leader to give prominence to religion in word and deed. In a major speech in 2016, Xi called for the "sinicization of religion."*

*He noted that, given the rise of religion among the Chinese people, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) must "guide the adaptation of religions to socialist society." In its academic sense, "sinicization of religion" refers to the indigenization of religious faith, practice, and ritual in Chinese culture and society. For Xi,*



Lieutenant Colonel Lucilio Miserani, USA, 18<sup>th</sup> Medical Command (Deployment Support) chaplain, administers religious support to fellow team members in Yona, Guam, April 18, 2020 (U.S. Army/Luisito Brooks)

*however, “sinicization” is profoundly political. It requires religious leaders and institutions demonstrably to embrace State Socialism and the leadership of the CCP.<sup>7</sup>*

The Council on Foreign Relations reports the widespread growth of religion among the Chinese population; by some estimates, China may have the largest Christian population in the world by 2030.<sup>8</sup> Religious attitudes and national policy will increasingly conflict, as the 6 percent of the Chinese population who make up the CCP become more out of step with the growing religious population. Additionally, China’s Belt and Road Initiative puts the country in contact with strongly religious populations across Eurasia. To advance its national agenda, China will need to adjust its approach to religious populations and gain a better understanding of the untapped soft power of religion.

Iran is a theocratic state that uses religion to control its population. According to Greg Bruno:

*Under Khomeini, the Iranian religious and political landscapes were dramatically transformed, making Shia Islam an inseparable element of the country’s political structure. Khomeini ushered in a new form of government anchored by the concept of velayat-e faqih, or rule of the Islamic jurist. In his 1970 book, Hokumat-e Islami: Velayat-e faqih, Khomeini argued that government should be run in accordance to sharia, or Islamic law. For that to happen, an Islamic jurist—or faqih—must oversee the country’s political structure.<sup>9</sup>*

Religion is a primary ideological factor in Iran’s foreign policy, which is overseen by the supreme leader—a cleric. Iran’s constitution grants the supreme leader’s office almost unlimited power.

According to Haidar Kherzi, “Today, Khomeini—like his well-known predecessor Ayatollah Khomeini, whose reign ended when he died in 1989—wields enormous control over Iran’s military, judiciary, treasury, media, foreign policy, presidential cabinet, and legislative process.”<sup>10</sup>

North Korea maintains a strong atheism, blocking or manipulating religious expression while simultaneously establishing a form of “emperor worship,” in the philosophy of *juche*, to control the population. According to Grace Lee:

*When Kim Il Sung unilaterally declared juche to be the governing principle of all aspects of North Korean life, as well as the ideological basis of all state policies, the philosophy gained the full authority of Kim Il Sung’s godlike status. Having established the infallibility of the juche philosophy and consolidated their own political power,*



KFOR Regional Command–East Liaison Monitoring Team K18, comprising Soldiers from 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 162<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiment, Oregon National Guard, RC-E Chaplain (Captain) Katie Declat, and Religious Support Specialist (Specialist) Darren Anderson from 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 135<sup>th</sup> Aviation, Colorado National Guard, meet with Father Srdjan at historic Church of Sveti Nikola in Kamenica, Kosovo, on August 3, 2020 (U.S. Army National Guard/W. Chris Clyne)

*Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il were able to use *juche* principles of self-sustenance and political and military independence as justification for policies such as the routing of a huge percentage of national income toward military expenditures, despite the famine sweeping through the populace. Due to the power and influence of one man, the Great Leader, the *juche* philosophy became inextricably embedded in the economic, political, military and cultural aspects of life in [North Korea].<sup>11</sup>*

There are also reports of growing clandestine religious organizations in North Korea that can further challenge the regime’s efforts to oppress religious expression.<sup>12</sup>

Violent extremist organizations such as the so-called Islamic State (IS) and al Qaeda perversely claim to find justification in the Quran for their atrocities. As reported in the *New York Times*, IS “leadership has emphasized a narrow and selective reading of the Quran and other religious rulings to not only justify violence, but also to elevate and celebrate each sexual assault as spiritually beneficial, even virtuous.”<sup>13</sup>

Beyond authoritarian regimes, all nations invest time and energy dealing with the realities of religion within their borders. One way of gauging a nation’s response to religion is to plot that country’s stance on religious freedom issues. An example is the Department of

State’s Annual Report to Congress on International Religious Freedom, which describes the status of religious freedom across countries; government policies violating religious belief and practices of various religious groups; and U.S. policies promoting religious freedom. The lesson from this information is that the impact of religion on governments and policies is diverse. Because simple assumptions will often be inaccurate, the U.S. military must consider the multitude of distinctions for how a nation’s relationship with religion can and will influence our military interactions. When the U.S. military acts in conjunction with partner nations—either bilaterally or in coalitions—the religious landscape

becomes even more dynamic. The mix of thoughts, attitudes, and convictions regarding religions becomes quite forceful. Consequently, the joint force requires a robust understanding of religion, religious issues, internal and external factors influencing religion, and, ultimately, regional stability.

## The U.S. Military and Religion

The relationship between the U.S. military and religion goes back to the beginning of the Nation. According to the Army History Center, the “Chaplain Corps dates back to 29 July 1775, when the Continental Congress authorized one chaplain for each regiment of the Continental Army, with pay equaling that of a captain.”<sup>14</sup> Not long after, the Navy Chaplain Corps was formed. According to Douglas Stutz, the

*Chaplain Corps traces its beginnings to 28 November 1775 when the second article of Navy Regulations was adopted. It stated that “the Commanders of the ships of the thirteen United Colonies are to take care that divine services be performed twice a day on board and a sermon preached on Sundays, unless bad weather or other extraordinary accidents prevent.”*<sup>15</sup>

For more than half of its history from 1775, the Chaplain Corps’ almost sole focus has been the provision of religious support for the direct spiritual needs of our military personnel.

But that situation began to change with the Cold War. As noted in a Joint Staff History Office information paper, the changing character of that conflict saw chaplains “tasked to go beyond their primary mission of pastoral care and provide advice on the effect of religion on military operations.”<sup>16</sup>

Subsequent conflicts in Vietnam, the Balkans, Iraq, and Afghanistan have increasingly drawn the chaplaincy into an advisory role, with chaplains, consistent with their noncombatant status, counseling on the impact of religion for military operations. Joint Publication 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, identifies religious advisement as addressing “the commander’s requirement to

receive germane subject matter advice on the impact of religion on operations. All military commanders are responsible for religious affairs in their command.”<sup>17</sup> In addition, chaplains were brought into dialogue with religious leaders, both civilian and military, in pursuing the amelioration “of suffering, the promotion of peace, and the benevolent expression of religion.”<sup>18</sup> The net effect is that military chaplains have been providing religious advisement to commanders for over 70 years.

It is important to make a significant distinction here: These examples are set against the backdrop of phases of war. Today, the nature of operations is more fluid. As JP 3-0, *Joint Operations*, states, the “complex nature of the strategic environment may require U.S. forces to conduct different types of joint operations and activities simultaneously across the conflict continuum.”<sup>19</sup> As the nature of operations continues to change and the continuum develops further into areas of competition, the ability to understand and account for the impact of religion will grow in importance.

One of the major efforts from the National Defense Strategy is that of strengthening alliances and attracting new partners.<sup>20</sup> In a world where religion plays a major role, and with religious freedom as a key principle within the National Security Strategy, the ability to demonstrate our appreciation for religion and religious freedom through willful engagement with religions and religious actors will speak volumes about the sincerity of our claims and intentions.

Despite the religious plurality and diversity within the United States, there is an amazing degree of unity and cohesion. Our military embodies this harmony within the Chaplain Corps. Our military’s engagement with religion models for other nations how to build cooperation—rather than friction—when it comes to religion.

## Religious Advisement as Strategic Enabler

At this point, we could justifiably ask what the problem is if the military has taken advantage of religious advisement for over 70 years. The problem is that

religious advisement as an enabler, and the benefits it brings for military operations, is not completely understood or applied. Although commanders do embrace the religious support role of chaplaincy to take care of the religious needs of U.S. military personnel, the recognition of religious advisement as an enabling function with utility to the commander is spotty at best—primarily limited to ground commanders who have previously benefited from the practice of religious advisement. Couple this situation with the Western bias against religion, and we find ourselves needing to relearn the same lessons. The answer is to institutionalize—across the joint force—the understanding of religious advisement as a necessary enabler.

It’s clear just from looking at policy and staffing that the entire joint force does not regard religious advisement as a key enabler. The Army has extensive guidance on religious support and external advisement contained in Army Techniques Publication 1-05.3, *Religious Support and External Advisement*, which provides 60 pages of material and dates from January 2019.<sup>21</sup> The Navy’s guidance on *Chaplain Advisement and Liaison*, Secretary of the Navy Instruction 1730.10A, covers five pages on external religious advisement.<sup>22</sup> Finally, Air Force Instruction 52-101, *Chaplain Planning and Organizing*, provides one page of material covering religious advisement.<sup>23</sup> The amount of effort and attention that the three Services devote to religious advisement policy and doctrine drives the level of understanding and interest within each Service and has a corresponding impact on CCMDs.

Staffing levels for chaplain billets across CCMDs likewise communicate a great deal regarding the overall expectations placed on those offices. CCMD chaplain teams range from zero billets at one command to a high of four billets at another. If the goal is to provide religious support only for assigned staff, these numbers may be adequate. However, if an appreciation truly existed for religious advisement as a staff function and force enabler at work across the staff and cross-functional teams, then it is hard to

conceive of two or three individuals accomplishing the advisement and religious support task within a command.

### What Should Religious Advisement at the Strategic Level Look Like?

It is one thing to make a claim that chaplain support to a CCMD should be organized into something more than a one- or two-person team; it is another thing to justify that expansion. So, what would be the benefit for a CCMD if it bought into the idea of creating a religious affairs staff section?

First, the combatant commanders could expect to gain a deeper appreciation for the religious dynamics within each country in their areas of operation. A religious affairs section could work with interagency offices that focus on religious issues and the extensive network of religious affairs teams across Service components. It could build expertise and understanding at the strategic level of not only major religions but also the primary issues, key personalities, and major influencers within each religious movement and geographic region. With central coordination at the CCMD level, products generated at component levels, such as religious area analysis and port call reports, could be rolled up, collated, and shared for analysis and increased understanding, rather than stovepiped and isolated. Collating such information would also identify which areas demand additional analysis and where dynamics are shifting over time. This in and of itself is no simple task: It requires dedicated work hours to build and manage. But the potential benefit to military operations would be invaluable, and the effort would strengthen our relations with allies and partners.

Second, a functional religious affairs staff section would enable coordination among the Service components and National Guard units participating in the State Partnership Program (SPP). This program links a state's National Guard, as a unique component of the Department of Defense, with the armed forces of a particular country in a cooperative relationship.<sup>24</sup> Currently there

are 78 partnerships in effect involving all 54 States and Territories. As Chaplain (Lieutenant Colonel) Kurt Mueller points out, "the SPP is a low cost, high payoff program that is ready for further development in the area of religious diplomacy."<sup>25</sup> Such coordination would minimize duplication of effort in support of partner-nation chaplaincies, identify gaps in support to partner-nation chaplaincies, and ensure that efforts among partner nations are synchronized with the commander's overall priorities within the area of operations. This effort would also ensure that CCMD staffs remain aware of the religious engagement efforts already in place within the geographic area and that the commander's priorities are reflected in component and State Partnership Program engagement strategies.

Third, when Embassies need to engage with religious actors within an assigned country, a sufficient religious affairs staff would be able to assess requests for religious leader support/engagement and work with the various components and National Guard units to offer the best support the Embassy requests, in conjunction with CCMD direction and guidance.

Finally, a sufficiently staffed and resourced religious affairs section could coordinate among various staff codes, working groups, cross-functional teams, and so forth. This ability, in turn, would ensure that the role of religion is adequately represented in problem analysis and courses of action development, plans development, command messaging, and engagement strategies. A properly staffed religious affairs section could do all these things to further the command's mission within the geographic area—while still being able to carry out the core function of providing direct religious support to and general care for the staff.

### Recommendations

It is worth noting again that some of the elements discussed here are already found within pockets of the military; the challenge is that the role of religious affairs is not universally understood or experienced. Over the past few

decades, many writers have called for an increased role for religious engagement, noted the growing impact of religion on military operations, and pointed to examples in which religious leader engagement has had positive impacts.<sup>26</sup> To ensure that the acceptance of religious advisement as enabler for the commander gains traction, more needs to be done than just raising awareness. This concept must be integrated into existing strategic-level military education.

Our leaders at the general and flag officer ranks will benefit from understanding that religion is something more than just a resource used to support their personnel. Professional military education should expose general and flag officers to the multifaceted nature of all religions as well as the complex ways in which governments choose to interact with religions and religious expression. This will result in a deeper appreciation for the influential role religion still plays in societal identity, perception, and national will.

Furthermore, the Service chaplaincies need to focus on preparing chaplains to serve in the joint environment and at CCMDs; this means preparing chaplains to understand the larger issues involved in external religious advisement, understanding the dynamics of religious developments, and gaining practice in the principles of religious leader engagement. The Service chaplaincies should strengthen their preparation of chaplains to serve in the joint force and highlight joint policy through their intermediate and advanced officer training courses. Services should also ensure that chaplains who receive funded graduate education in world religions or religion and culture courses serve in assignments that allow them to contribute to the knowledge pool required to support components and CCMDs.

Finally, the Department of Defense should consider the benefit of—and invest billets and resources in—establishing religious affairs sections with the bandwidth to provide both religious advisement and religious support to senior-level staffs. Those commanders who receive both counsel and support will be properly positioned to understand

and interact with the persistent and prominent role of religion in the global arena. JFQ

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center, *The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010–2050* (Washington, DC: Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 3.

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<sup>5</sup> *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2018).

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<sup>9</sup> Greg Bruno, "Background: Religion and Politics in Iran," *New York Times*, June 19, 2008, available at <[https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/cfr/world/slot3\\_20080619.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=print](https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/cfr/world/slot3_20080619.html?_r=1&pagewanted=print)>.

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<sup>11</sup> Grace Lee, "The Political Philosophy of Juche," *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2003), 105–112.

<sup>12</sup> Nazanin Zadeh-Cummings, "True Believers: Faith-Based NGO in North Korea," *NK News*, March 14, 2017, available at <<https://www.nknews.org/2017/03/true-believers-faith-based-ngos-in-north-korea/>>.

<sup>13</sup> Rukmini Callimachi, "ISIS Enshrines a Theology of Rape," *New York Times*, August 13, 2015, available at <[www.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/world/middleeast/isis-enshrines-a-theology-of-rape.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/world/middleeast/isis-enshrines-a-theology-of-rape.html)>.

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<sup>14</sup> Army History Center, "U.S Army Chaplain Corps," n.d., available at <<https://armyhistory.org/u-s-army-chaplain-corps/>>.

<sup>15</sup> Douglas H. Stutz, "Happy 239<sup>th</sup>—Chaplain Corps Birthday Held at Naval Hospital Bremerton," *Navy.mil*, November 27, 2014, available at <[https://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story\\_id=84667](https://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=84667)>.

<sup>16</sup> Christopher Holmes, "History of Chaplains and Advising on Religious Affairs," information paper, Joint History Office, April 4, 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Joint Publication JP-1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, March 25, 2013, Incorporating Change 1, July 12, 2017), IV-22.

<sup>18</sup> Joint Guide 1-05, *Religious Affairs in Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, February 1, 2018), III-6.

<sup>19</sup> Joint Publication JP 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, January 17, 2017, Incorporating Change 1, October 22, 2018), V-4.

<sup>20</sup> *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*.

<sup>21</sup> Army Techniques Publication 1-05.3, *Religious Support and External Advisement* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, January 2019).

<sup>22</sup> Secretary of the Navy Instruction 1730.10A, *Chaplain Advisement and Liaison*, August 28, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Air Force Instruction 52-101, *Chaplain Planning and Organizing* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Air Force, July 15, 2019).

<sup>24</sup> National Guard, "State Partnership Program," n.d., available at <<https://www.nationalguard.mil/Leadership/Joint-Staff/J-5/International-Affairs-Division/State-Partnership-Program/>>.

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<sup>26</sup> William Sean Lee, Christopher J. Burke, and Zonna M. Crayne, *Military Chaplaincies as Peace Builders: Embracing Indigenous Religions in Stability Operations*, The Cadre Papers 20 (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, February 1, 2005); Bradford E. Ableson, "A Time for Conversion: Chaplains and Unified Commanders," *Joint Force Quarterly* 32 (Autumn 2002), 98–103; Eric Patterson, ed., *Military Chaplains in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Beyond* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

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By Håkon Lunde Saxi, Bengt Sundelius, and Brett Swaney



The efforts of Norway, Sweden, and Finland to enhance societal resilience through unique "total defense"

and "comprehensive security" initiatives are unlikely to change the near-term strategic calculus of Russia. Over time, however, a concerted application of total defense in harmony with Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty will aid in the resilience to, and deterrence of, Russian hostile measures and hybrid warfare, and serve as a complement to a regional denial-based deterrence strategy. The Nordic states could "export" resilience to the greater Baltic Sea Region by strengthening participation in European Union energy and infrastructure projects with the Baltic states, amplifying efforts to connect infrastructure links among allies and partners and decouple from adversaries.



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