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Onward Christian Military Chaplains! Marching to War

By Rev. William Alberts
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Military chaplains serving in the unnecessary Afghanistan and falsely-based Iraq wars are accomplices to horrible war crimes launched by the George W. Bush administration. Complicit also are their sponsoring faith organizations, with theological schools hopping on President Bush's "global war on terrorism" warwagon and promoting military chaplaincy as a career, and clinical pastoral education organizations providing their preparatory specialized training.

If it were really about "supporting the troops," faith leaders and their members would have lived up to their own moral professions of justice by strongly and continuously opposing the terrible war crimes our bipartisan government has committed against the citizens of Afghanistan and Iraq in our name— and the unnecessary sacrifice of American lives. With the birth of the brutal ISIS a primary by-product of the U.S's own murderous invasion and occupation of Iraq. These wars are not about protecting and spreading freedom, but about advancing imperialistic capitalism's "free enterprise." And there is more evil committed in our name.

Internationally renowned political analyst and dissident Noam Chomsky writes that "the world's greatest terrorist campaign" is "Obama's global project of assassination of 'terrorists.'" The

‘resentment-generating impact’ of those drone and special forces strikes should be too well known to require further comment.” Chomsky also states, “The U. S. is the world’s leading terrorist state, and proud of it.” (Noam Chomsky / The Leading Terrorist State, www.truth-out.org, Nov. 3, 2014) National sovereignty-violating drone warfare that kills women and children and other civilians, creates endless enemies and blowback violence. Which justifies endless war—and unending profit for the military/industrial/ energy/intelligence/security complex.

All of this evil unleashed on the world by our government after the terrible 9/11 attacks against America. And in response, what we have is not the separation of church and state, but the *subjugation* of the church to the state—with clergy serving as chaplain accomplices of America’s militaristic, warring status quo.

The shocking 9/11 attacks against our country should have led to national self-examination—with faith leaders, who emphasize the importance of soul searching, demanding it and leading the way. Self-understanding is fundamental to our individual health and national security. Thus a constructive response to any personal or nation-wide tragedy or loss should include asking how our own behavior may have contributed to it. Such self-examination—and the understanding and empathy it creates—is the emotional cornerstone of the clinical pastoral education of all faith leaders.

But U.S. faith leaders were silent about national soul-searching in response to 9/11. There were no Biblically-inspired calls for national self-examination. Like Jesus’s story of the Pharisee and tax collector who “went to the temple to pray,” with the Pharisee “praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector’ . . . But the tax collector . . . would not even look up to heaven . . . saying, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner!’” (Luke 18: 10-14) And Jesus’ teaching about judging others: “How can you say to you neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.” (Matthew 7: 1-5) And the words of the prophet Micah: “He has told you, O mortal,” what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” (6: 8)

Had faith leaders demanded and pursued national soul-searching, we would have discovered what the Pentagon’s own advisory panel reported *after* President Bush and the warmongers in his administration invaded Afghanistan and Iraq. That “Muslims do not hate our freedom, but rather

they hate our policies,” including America’s “one-sided support in favor of Israel and against Palestinian rights, and the long-standing, ever-increasing support for what Muslims collectively see as tyrannies, most notably Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Pakistan and the Gulf States.” Thus “when American public diplomacy talks about bringing democracy to Islamic societies, this is seen as no more than self-serving hypocrisy.” Furthermore: “In the eyes of the Muslim world . . . American occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq has not led to democracy there, but only more chaos and suffering.” (“U.S. Fails to Explain Policies to Muslim World, Panel Says,” By Thom Shanker, *The New York Times*, Nov. 24, 2004); “They hate our policies, not our freedom,” *Canadian Content*, Aug. 19, 2006)

America’s religious leaders allowed President Bush to shove them aside and become Faith Leader-in-Chief. Thus, instead of introspection, we got American exceptionalism. We got knee-jerk, flag-waving, distraction-inducing unreflective patriotism. In his “Address to the Nation on the Terrorists Attacks,” Bush asserted, “America was targeted for attack because we are the brightest beacon of freedom and opportunity in the world.” (www.presidency.ucsb.edu, Sept. 11, 2001)

Instead of self-reflection, we also got projection. “And make no mistake about it,” President Bush declared, “These are evil doers. They have no justification for their actions. There’s no religious justification, there’s no political justification. The only motivation is evil” (“International Campaign Against Terror Grows: Remarks by President Bush and Prime Minister Koizumi of Japan in Photo Opportunity, *The White House*, Sept. 25, 2001)

The “Christ-changed-my-heart” evangelical President Bush wrapped his criminal war plans against Iraq in “prayer” and “the ways of Providence.” Two weeks before U.S.-led forces invaded Iraq, he said at a press conference, “I pray daily. I pray for wisdom and guidance and strength. . . . I pray for peace. I pray for peace.” (*The New York Times*, March 7, 2003) Two years into that war, which was condemned as “Illegal” by then U.N Secretary-General Kofi Annan, Bush told Congress and the American people, “The road of Providence is uneven and unpredictable. Yet we know where it leads. It leads to freedom . . . freedom’s power to change the world. We are part of a great adventure . . . to spread the peace that freedom brings.” (“Transcript of State of the Union Address and cleared by The White House,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 3, 2005, tape of address)

The Faith-Leader-in-Chief of “the greatest country on the face of the earth” knew that American exceptionalism would ring a bell with the one true belief of evangelical Christians. “God and

Country.” American exceptionalism and Christocentricism. Two sides of the same imperialistic coin. Thus the vast majority of white evangelical Christians joined President Bush’s “great adventure . . . to spread the peace that freedom brings”– and their one true Christian faith to the Muslim Other. As religion professor and evangelical Christian Charles Marsh wrote in a *New York Times* op ed piece: “An astonishing 87 percent of all white evangelical Christians in the United States supported the president’s decision in April 2003.” Marsh explained, “The war sermons rallied the evangelical congregations behind the invasion of Iraq.” He stated that evangelists like Franklin Graham and Marvin Olasky “claim[ed] that the American invasion of Iraq would create exciting new prospects for proselytizing Muslims.” (“Wayward Christian Soldiers,” Jan. 20, 2006)

President Bush evidently would have a problem with Jesus’ teaching about “hypocrites[who] love to stand and pray . . . so that they may be seen by others.” (Matthew 6: 5, 6) Bush wore his piety on his sleeve. So much so that it gave credibility to a story about Nabil Shaath, then Palestinian foreign minister, telling the BBC that Bush said, ‘God would tell me, ‘George, go fight those terrorists in Afghanistan.’ And I did, and then God would tell me, ‘George, go and end tyranny in Iraq’ . . . and I did.’” (“Bush ‘God Talk’ Rumors About Iraq War Spark Controversy And Debate,” Americans United for the separation of Church and State, www.au.org/church-state, Nov. 2005)

While The White House called the story “absurd,” Australian *Canberra Times* journalist Paul Vallely used it to make a point about the power of religion to rationalize evil. Vallely wrote, “In one sense, however, it doesn’t matter what he [Bush] actually said. What is alarming enough is that it is the kind of thing he would say. Every line of it is entirely consonant with George W. Bush’s religious world view,” which Vallely called “dangerous.” His point: “It creates in him a delusional sense that he and his nation have been chosen by God for special responsibilities and special favors fostering the perilous perception that his norms are absolute norms, his form of government automatically superior to all others, and his spiritual tradition the only really true religion. And,” Vallely added, “most dangerously, it allows him to classify ‘the other’ as evil. (*Ibid*)

Paul Vallely is not just talking about President Bush’s “dangerous . . . religious world view.” He is also talking about onward Christian military chaplains marching *to* war with him. The personal testimonies of certain chaplains reveal the rationalizations used to justify violating the peace and justice teachings in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5: 1-12) and participating in criminal wars against other human beings.

Preparing to leave Afghanistan after an eight months deployment, Captain and Lutheran Scott Dunfee, a Navy chaplain, “writes to his congregation in Oregon about his ministry in Afghanistan.” He says that “two recent experiences stand out” while there, and one is with “children who have been orphaned by the war.” He tells about bringing the “children, ages 4 to 14” to a farm “to pet horses and goats, play with puppies, play games, and eat fresh food grown on the farm.” He goes on: “We also bring school supplies; fruit and nuts and candy; clothing and stuffed animals . . . we play with the kids, do art activities with them, and share a meal.” (“Reflections from Afghanistan from a Navy Chaplain in the Reserve Component, By U.S. Navy Chaplain Corps, *chaplaincorps.navylive.dodlive.mil*, March 10, 2015)

Chaplain Dunfee then refers to “Jamal . . . one of the youngest children in the orphanage . . . about 4 years old . . . [whose] parents were killed by the Taliban.” Dunfee points out that Jamal “does not talk,” as he’s been “traumatized,” and is “still suffering from Post Traumatic Stress (PTS).” The chaplain then makes an aside: “As I’ve heard several people say, ‘This whole nation of Afghanistan suffers from PTS!’” (*Ibid*)

Chaplain Dunfee then returns to Jamal and the message he wants to share with his church members in Oregon. “Despite his trauma, Jamal smiles and looks wide-eyed at the world.” They “did art together,” and Dunfee went on, “while he does not talk, he mimicked me in making sounds made by the various animals we drew. He grinned and laughed after each rendition.” The chaplain then wrote, “I’d like to think it was some small way to bring Light and Life to a precious Child of God.” And he ended with, “May he be held in Divine arms until he feels so safe he can begin to speak! And may no fear ever silence him again!” (*Ibid*) An example of the perversion of religion: bringing “Light and Life” to the death and darkness he is complicit in creating. The chaplain’s disconnect reveals the power of rationalization.

This story is really about military Chaplain Scott Dunfee, and not Jamal. The four-year-old orphan’s grinning face and laughter brought “Light and Life”—and justification—to an *occupying* Chaplain of “God.” How often is the word “God” used to dress up evil in good?

Chaplain Dunfee did not tell his Oregon congregation how many children in that orphanage were orphaned—or killed—by the relentless U.S. carpet-bombing of Afghanistan. Of course, he would not have been able to because our government does not keep count of the deaths of Afghan mothers and fathers and children. But *The Independent* newspaper does: it reported that “a catastrophic error by carpet-bombing US Air Force warplanes was blamed yesterday for the deaths of about 150 unarmed Afghan civilians in a densely populated frontline town.” One of the

fleeing refugees reported, “I saw 20 dead children on the streets.” (“Carpet bombing ‘kills 150 civilians’ in frontline town,” By Justin Huggler, Nov. 19, 2001)

Chaplain Dunfee, an officer like all other military chaplains in the chain of command, imposed his “God talk” religious beliefs on the Afghan people, which served to make their oppressed reality disappear. He did not tell his Oregon congregation that “more than 26,000 civilians” were estimated to “have died violent deaths” as a result of the U.S. war against Afghanistan. Nor that “the war has exacerbated the effects of poverty, malnutrition, poor sanitation, lack of access to health care, and environmental degradation on Afghans’ health.” Nor did he inform his congregation that “the war in Afghanistan continues destroying lives,” including the lives and limbs of children like Jamal, who mistake the U.S.-dropped yellow colored lethal cluster bomblets for airdropped small food aid parcels and reach for them. (“Costs of War: Afghan Civilians, Watson Institute for International & Public Affairs, Brown University, watson.brow.edu, March 2015)

Striking is the extent to which “God” is used to rationalize war crimes. Another example is “Col. and Army Chaplain John Read, a United Methodist minister, who, as reported, “earned the Bronze Star Medal for his bravery under fire in Iraq.” Not that he fired weapons. “As chaplains, we’re not the trigger pullers,” he said. “We’re there to support the trigger pullers and to provide pastoral care to America’s sons and daughters.” (“Military Chaplains From Iraq, Afghanistan Unite in Elsayh And Share Experiences, By Kerry Smith, General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church, www.gbhem.org, Copr. 2015)

“The trigger pullers” for whom military chaplain Read “provides pastoral care,” are part of a force that killed hundreds of thousands to over a million Iraqi civilians, including women and children. “The trigger pullers” turned one to two million Iraqi women into widows, caused five million children to become orphans, and forced over four million citizens to flee their homes. (“Iraq’s Shocking Human Toll: About 1 Million Killed, 4.5 Million Displaced, 1-2 Million Widows, 5 Million Orphans. By John Tirman, the Nation, *Alternet*, Feb. 1, 2009)

Chaplain Read has written about his 29 years of service as a military chaplain: “From the time I was in college at McKendree through seminary at Eden Theological Seminary, I had always felt that this was where God was calling me to serve.” His concluding words, “I am proud to serve in this setting and proud to be from the Illinois Great Rivers Annual Conference. ‘Pro Deo, et Patria’ For God and Country.” (“Extravagant Generosity: My Itinerary as an Army Chaplain,” www.igrc.org, March 6, 2013)

It is possible that a 20-year-old lance corporal marine did not believe “God was calling” him “to serve” anywhere near the U.S.-wasted city of Fallujah in Iraq. He committed suicide by shooting himself with his M-16 rifle. His suicide presented a problem for Navy chaplain Michael Baker, as it shocked the marine’s closest friends. The problem was worsened by a noncommissioned officer who “told them they could get through this and needed to realize that their deceased comrade was right then burning in hell.” (“Military chaplain: Marines in Iraq look to pastor for answers to tough questions,” By Lee Lawrence, Correspondent, *The Christian Science Monitor*, Oct. 30, 2007)

The noncommissioned officer’s “bombshell” led the dead marine’s friends to “collar” Chaplain Baker, “wanting to know whether their buddy was truly in hell.” “Flabbergasted,” Baker sought to “mitigate their hurt” by saying, “From my understanding, God did not make any of us on earth the ultimate judge, jury and executioner,” and “God is your friend’s judge.” The chaplain’s words helped. The dead marine’s comrades did not think he “should be awarded the honor of a marine killed in action.” But, when asked about providing “any memorial at all, their heads snapped up,” and they said, “He deserves something.” (*Ibid*)

In the above story, Chaplain Baker does not explore why the young marine committed suicide. Nor did the story pursue why 22 veterans commit suicide a day.

What may have been too much for the young marine was the fact that he, his comrade marines, Chaplain Baker, and the whole U. S. military were all acting as “the ultimate judge, jury and executioner” *of the Iraqi people*. The marine’s humanity could well have been repulsed and overwhelmed by the inhumanity perpetrated on the Iraqi people—and on U.S. soldiers in return. So many human beings were “burning in hell” there. In committing suicide, the marine may have revealed that he was the one most struggling with the immorality of the Iraq war—which might be why his suicide could have threatened to engulf other marines in doubt about their “mission.” On a deeper level, he may have realized that his humanity and the humanity of the Iraqi people *were one*.

There are other examples of the use of “God” to rationalize inhumanity. Like the book edited by Eric Patterson called, *Military Chaplains in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Beyond: Advisement and Leader Engagement in Highly Religious Environments*. The book is a *self-contradictory* focus “on how military chaplains have engaged local religious leaders in *pursuit of peace and understanding* (italics added), particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan since 9/11.” (*berkleycenter.georgetown.edu*, Aug. 1, 2014) The conquering occupiers pursuing “peace and

understanding” with the occupied. Here is the height of religious arrogance that does such violence to the reality of America’s victims.

A similarly reality-violating, criminality-rationalizing “God talk” book is entitled, *A Table in the Presence*, by Lt. Carey H. Cash. It is promoted as presenting “the inspiring account of how a U.S. Marine battalion experienced God’s grace amid the chaos of the war in Iraq.” It goes on, “There are some places where you don’t expect to find God.” And “for the men of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, downtown Baghdad was one of those places . . . and even deeper into enemy territory . . . but when the smoke cleared, God’s touch was clearly visible.” And the authenticating *Biblical* quote: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.—Psalm 23:5”

Of course, our troops deserve the spiritual care of chaplains. And that spiritual care includes confronting those political and Pentagon decision-makers who unnecessarily put them in harm’s way to be sacrificed on the altar of corporate greed—leaders who wrap America’s pursuit of world domination in “the ways of Providence.”

“God” has been co-opted by our political leaders to justify blatant war crimes that violate The Golden Rule, which holds sacred everyone’s common humanity. And, sadly, Christian military chaplains and their sponsoring faith groups have given up their prophetic role and become accomplices to war crimes. Instead of speaking truth to political and corporate power, they have opted for a share of the “market,” and are providing the Invocations and Benedictions for those in power. It is far past time for military chaplains and their faith groups to say “Yes!” to the orphans of Afghanistan, the widows of Iraq and the U.S. soldiers and veterans driven to commit suicide, and “No!” to serving in the military’s real mission of pursuing American hegemony.