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Chaplains of Empire

By Rev. William Alberts
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A 10-minute video of the aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson, reported to be “at the centre of operations against IS,” introduces us to the chaplains of the American empire. Created by BBC diplomatic and defence editor Mark Urban, the video begins with his introductory words: “If you want to learn about American’s fight against the Islamic State, start here” – with “this one ship” which “carries 5000 people and a strike force of 60 jets.” He then says, “The Paris attacks prompted a timely reminder of what it’s all for.”

Mark Urban’s words are followed by a chaplain’s Invocation declaring “what it’s all for.”

Good evening shipmates, this is Chaplain Thames. We pause this evening to give mind to our French coalition partners. To grieve the vicious murder of at least 12 of their countrymen in Paris today, at the hands of the same men motivated by maniacal forces—the same forces that we battle in Iraq and Syria. It takes every single one of us to carry this fight, and help stem the tide of tyranny and hatred. (“On board with the US air crews fighting Islamic State,” *BBC News*, Jan. 15, 2015)

The video concludes with Mark Urban stating, “The captain told us they are working ISIS targets a couple bodies at a time. But this ship, and those that follow it on this station, can produce raids day after day, month after month.” (*Ibid*) The video then ends with a chaplain’s Benediction: “O Lord . . . grant a safe night’s passage to the United States ship Carl Vinson and carrier Strike

Group One.” (*Ibid*) The Invocation and Benediction of a chaplain of empire. The hijacking of morality and spirituality to justify war and destruction.

“We . . . grieve the vicious murder of at least 12 . . . in Paris today, at the hands of the same men motivated by maniacal forces . . . that we battle in Iraq and Syria.” Chaplain Thames is referring to the January 7-9, 2014 terrorist killings of cartoonists and the editor at satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*, along with two policemen and four Jewish persons.

“The same maniacal forces we battle in Iraq and Syria.” Internationally renowned political analyst Noam Chomsky provides a broader understanding of “maniacal forces”—which reveals the military indoctrination and selective morality of military chaplains like Comdr. Thames. Chomsky cites the widespread outrage in the West to the Paris attacks, with millions declaring, “I am Charlie.” He then provides a *morality* check by broadening Chaplain Thames’s understanding of “tyranny and hatred”: “Also ignored in the ‘war on terrorism’ is the most extreme terrorist campaign of modern times—Barack Obama’s global assassination campaign targeting people suspected of perhaps intending to harm us some day, and any unfortunate who happen to be nearby.” Chomsky also refers to “the 50 civilians reportedly killed in a U. S.-led bombing raid in Syria in December, which was barely reported.” (“Chomsky: Paris attacks show hypocrisy of West’ Outrage,” Noam Chomsky. CNN.com, Jan. 20, 2015)

“The same [maniacal] forces we battle in Iraq and Syria.” Chaplain Thames’ patriotic “God and country” conditioning protects him from recognizing that he represents the very “maniacal forces” of “tyranny and hatred” that tore Iraq apart. The selective memory of chaplains of empire calls for the repeated citing of reality in an attempt to penetrate their self-serving obliviousness. Reality, like the unnecessary, falsely-based invasion and occupation of Iraq, launched by the George W. Bush administration. The deaths of hundreds of thousands to over a million of Iraqi civilians. The more than one million Iraqi mothers made widows, and four million children orphans. The estimated 2.5 million Iraqis displaced internally, and some 2 million externally as refugees, fleeing to Syria and elsewhere. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein, and the deliberate fomenting of sectarian violence between the Sunnis and Shiites to divide and conquer—with the marginalization and persecution of Hussein’s Sunni party fueling the creation of a vengeful ISIS. These war crimes taking their toll on Americans, with some 4,486 U.S. soldiers dead and hundreds of thousands wounded. The use of our country’s resources to destroy human life and infrastructure, which has contributed to the dangerously widening economic gap between the politically influential wealthiest Americans and everyone else.

All of this “tyranny and hatred” in the name of “Operation Iraqi Freedom.” And for what? It was not about liberating Iraq with “freedom,” which “is God’s gift to every man and woman in the world,” as former president George Bush repeatedly declared to justify his criminal war. It was about unleashing “maniacal forces” to steal the Iraqi people’s huge oil reserves. Journalist and oil and energy analyst Antonia Juhasz writes, “Yes the Iraq War was a war for oil, and it was a war with winners: Big Oil.” She states, “Before the 2003 invasion, Iraq’s domestic oil industry was fully nationalized and closed to Western oil companies. A decade of war later,” she continues, “it is largely privatized and utterly dominated by foreign firms. From Exxon Mobil and Chevron to BP and Shell, the West’s largest oil companies have set up shop in Iraq. So have a slew of American oil service companies,” she adds, “including Halliburton, the Texas based

firm Dick Cheney ran before becoming George W. Bush's running mate in 2000." ("Why the war in Iraq was fought for Big Oil, [CNN.com](http://www.cnn.com), April 15, 2013)

It is about empire-building, not spreading "freedom and democracy" and "protecting the American people." Empire building, hence estimates of between 725 and 800 U.S. military bases around the world. Why? "To ensure that no nation or combination of nations can exert influence that the president, his advisors, and the Pentagon have not sanctioned," stated now deceased Professor Emeritus Chalmers Johnson, author of *The Sorrows of Empire*. ("Speaking with Chalmers Johnson, author of *The Sorrows of Empire*, americanempireproject.com)

Chaplains of empire like Fr. David Thames fit Noam Chomsky's description of those who "carefully construct" their "living memory to include Their crimes against us while scrupulously excluding Our crimes against them—the latter not crimes but noble defense of the highest values, sometimes inadvertently flawed." ("Chomsky: Paris attacks show hypocrisy of West's outrage," *Ibid*)

First the Invocation: "We pause . . . to grieve the vicious murder of at least 12 of their countrymen in Paris, at the hands of the same [maniacal] forces we battle in Iraq and Syria." Then the Benediction: "O Lord . . . grant a safe night's passage to the United States ship Carl Vinson and Carrier Strike Force One." A chaplain of empire, who's ultimate authority is not the "Lord," but the "Pentagod."

An Invocation and Benediction that would seem to discourage shipmates from sharing with Chaplain Thames—or other of the Ship's chaplains—any moral conflicts about their military intervention. In fact, as the USS Carl Vinson's highest moral authority, Fr. Thames would more likely help to allay any doubts about and reinforce commitment to "targeting a couple of bodies at a time." As he said, "It takes every one of us to carry this fight, and help stem the tide of tyranny and hatred."

Chaplain Thames is believed to exemplify U.S. military chaplains of empire—of whom there are many. Thus this critique is not just about him, but about the institutional structures that create chaplains of empire like him. His Christian denomination. The seminary that prepared him for ministry. His specialized clinical pastoral training which is required of military chaplains.

Typical of chaplains of empire, Chaplain Thames gives us the opportunity to engage in a greatly needed discussion of the morality of military chaplains serving in the U. S.'s so-called global "war on terrorism." A discussion that is sorely missing from local congregations, denominational bodies, their seminaries, and the certifying organizations that provide the specialized clinical pastoral training required of military chaplains. The following information on Cmdr. Thames suggests that a discussion of the morality of America's military interventions around the world is taboo.

Last July Fourth weekend, Christ Church Coronado (Episcopal), located near the large San Diego Naval Base, celebrated "Our Armed Forces," with "CDR David Thames, Command Chaplain, USS Carl Vinson . . . our guest speaker." The announcement in Christ Church's newsletter continued: "Parishioners are encouraged to don their best *red, white, and blue*;

military personnel may wear *their dress uniform*. Also, “Former military members should either wear their uniforms or if in civilian clothing, wear their miniature medals.” And, “A special brass quartet will be joining us in worship.” (*The Communicator*, The Latest News and Events from Christ Church Coronado, June 30, 2015) Obviously, “God and country” are so indistinguishable here that any discussion of the morality of U.S. military interventions would be a sign of heresy and treason.

Not that Christ Church lacks moral concerns. It hosts San Diego’s Blood Bank’s Bloodmobile, which helps to save lives. It conducts an “annual [school] backpack drive for low-income and homeless kids.” And Christ Church members donate food and volunteer their service to another Episcopal church’s Neighborhood Food Pantry. (*Ibid*) These are important ministries. Still, they suggest that it is easier—and safer—to be a shepherd, who sees people as sheep to be tended to. Rather than a prophet, who sees peoples as individuals with human rights, and speaks reality and moral truth to those in power on behalf of marginalized and oppressed persons.

Chaplain Thames is motivated by moral concerns, though circumscribed. In 2012, the Chief of Navy Chaplains Office reported that “Cmdr. David Thames, an Episcopal priest and Navy chaplain, currently assigned as deputy executive assistant to the chief of Navy Chaplains, was invited to deliver a sermon to honor ‘veterans across time who’ve put on the uniform of this nation to stand in the gap between freedom and freedom’s frontier.’” Thames’ sermon included “his tour of duty in Iraq in 2007 with the 12th Marines regiment, where he traveled extensively throughout the Al Anbar province, alongside the Regimental SgtMaj, providing pastoral care to Sailors and Marines . . . whom he encouraged to speak honestly of their combat experiences, with a humbleness of heart, and to have the fortitude to stand apart and ask for help when needed.” And upon their discharge, he “encouraged these warriors to cling to virtue, integrity, and humility.” Also noted: Thames’ presence at Christ Church “was made more meaningful since, twenty years earlier, he delivered his first live sermon at the same church, as a student at Virginia Theological Seminary.” (“Navy Chaplain Participates in Veterans Day Service at Historic Christ Church,” By Christianne M. Witten, Chief of Chaplains Office, www.navy.mil, Nov. 16, 2012)

No doubt Chaplain Thames provided laudable pastoral care to sailors and marines in harm’s way in Iraq. Greatly neglected by chaplains of empire and their faith bodies is a discussion of the morality of putting the sailors and marines in harm’s way in Iraq *in the first place*—and keeping them there.

A look at Virginia Theological Seminary (VTS) where Chaplain Thames prepared for ministry, helps us to understand something of the faith institution that helped to shape his beliefs. True, he attended VTS almost 10 years before former president George W. Bush used the 9/11 attacks against the U. S. to justify launching his administration’s criminal war against Afghanistan and Iraq. But Thames’ motivational-like Invocation on the USS Carl Vinson is believed to reveal the seminary’s overriding accommodation to the U. S. government’s illegal military interventions in its global “war on terrorism.”

A brief examination of Virginia Theological Seminary’s curriculum indicates that courses on war and peace are taught. Such as, “War, Peace, and Resistance,” which “considers contrasting

perspectives on the topic of war, peace, and resistance in the history of Christian ethics.” Also, “The Church in the Public Square,” which “will explore the intersection of church and civic life, particularly the church’s role in shaping a just society.” And, “Jesus and Nonviolence,” which seeks “to contribute to the spiritual growth of theological students as effective peace makers.” (*Virginia Theological Seminary Catalogue*, 2006-2008)

Virginia Theological Seminary also offers a course in “Resistant Theologies,” which “will begin to equip leaders to participate in dialogue, collaboration, partnership, and planning which unveils unjust power relations and works towards a fuller expression of the Christian gospel.” One aim of the course is to help the student “express an understanding of the gospel which assesses the West’s attempts at hegemony and dominance.” (*VTS Catalog*, 2015-2016)

Actually, the “hegemony and dominance” comes primarily from the United States, not “the West,” which reality the description of this course on “Resistant Theologies” avoids stating. Also unstated here is the fact that the mission of “the Christian gospel” itself is one of “hegemony and dominance.” In fact, the Episcopal Church’s own commitment to “hegemony and dominance” is seen in its mission statement: “The mission of the church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. *Book of Common Prayer*, page 855”—(“The Value of a Mission Statement,” by Linda Buskirk, www.ecfvp.org, Jan. 6. 2012) Similar creedal statements of “hegemony and dominance” are readily found in United Methodist, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Baptist and other Christian denominations.

The inseparable allegiance to “God and country” is seen in an extensive Virginia Theological Seminary article on “VTS Chaplains to the Armed Services.” VTS has provided chaplains for the armed forces from the Civil War to Iraq. Researched by Virginia Seminary Archivist, Julie E. Randle from Seminary Archives, the article ends with testimonies of VTS’s military chaplains—including that of “Richard L. Schweinsburg, Jr. VTS ’77,” who, during his deployment in 2005, wrote to an Episcopal Church in the States. His note suggests circumscribed morality at work: “I hope you will keep all of us over here in your prayers. . . . Pray for a just peace, and the safe return of those now in harm’s way.” Alongside his note is a list of the names of 34 VTS graduates on duty as “Chaplains in Military Service, including that of “David B. Thames.” (*Virginia Seminary Journal*, Sept. 2005)

“God and country” could easily be called “Country and god.” Much of mainstream religion in the United States serves as a *conduit* for the government’s military interventions, not its *conscience*. An adjunct that accommodates *what is*, not an advocate for *what ought to be*. An accessory after the fact that goes along with unjust wars, not a determiner of moral facts beforehand—or during conflicts. Ready to support, and to pick up the pieces, and provide needed spiritual and pastoral care for military persons in harm’s way, but missing in action when it comes to opposing the immorality of political decision-makers who create harm’s way.

It appears that the bottom line of many faith groups is their own self-interest. For example, the mission statement of the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education (ACPE) is “advancing exceptional experience-based theological education and professional practice to heal a hurting world.” (*ACPE/ Mission & Vision Statements*) But ACPE’s understanding of “a hurting world” is morally circumscribed. The dominant clinical pastoral education-certifying interfaith

organization, ACPE has cornered the Department of Defense “market,” in contracting with the armed forces to provide the required clinical pastoral training for military chaplains like Fr. David Thames. Also, some one hundred American theological seminaries use ACPE as the primary resource for the clinical pastoral training of their students, including those who go on to become military chaplains.

The aim here is not to diminish the importance of clinical pastoral training of military chaplains—or of hospital chaplains, or clergy serving local congregations. Clinical pastoral education enables trainees to develop integrated self-understanding and inner emotional security that contribute to their competency in experiencing the reality of others and providing effective spiritual care for people who are part of that “hurting world.”

But the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education’s circumscribed morality shrinks its awareness of “a hurting world” to exclude those whom our government and military have determined to be The Other. There is no real discussion in ACPE clinical pastoral education training centers about the U.S.’s illegal, falsely-based military wars of choice in Afghanistan and Iraq and elsewhere. No moral discussion of the resulting horrific deaths, diminishment and dislocation of millions of people. No moral discussion of America’s violation of the national security of countries with its weaponized drone warfare — its “kill list”— filling the skies with dread and bringing sudden death and injury to innocent children, women and men. No moral discussion of the U. S.’s pursuit of world domination under the pretense of protecting us citizens. No moral discussion of the U.S.’s global “war on terrorism,” which benefits the military/industrial/energy/intelligence complex. No moral discussion of the U. S.’s role in enabling Israel to continue its long oppression of the Palestinian people. No moral discussion about the insidious militarization of America. Nor about the ever widening economic gap between the wealthiest and “a hurting world” of U.S. citizens. No moral concern expressed over America’s white-controlled hierarchy of access to political, economic and legal power, reinforced by police departments that occupy the neighborhoods of people of color, not protect them.

If the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education were to include such moral concerns in its clinical pastoral education centers, it would lose the military goose with the golden egg—gone would be its centers on military bases and at VA hospitals. ACPE would also risk losing its U.S. Department of Education endorsement. For the same reason, ACPE-affiliated journals are assumed to avoid publishing articles on the morality of the U. S. global “war on terrorism” and military interventions. Instead, articles concentrate on providing professional spiritual care and support for the needs of “wounded warriors”—after the fact. The American Psychological Association provides a warning sign for religious bodies, the former undergoing severe moral recriminations after violating its ethical rules by participating in the harsh interrogation of “maniacal” detainees at the Guantanamo Bay prison.

There is an exception here. *Pastoral Report*, web publication of the College of Pastoral Supervision and Psychology (CPSP), another interfaith organization providing clinical pastoral education, has dared to discuss the morality of U.S. military interventions. At its annual meeting in 2007, then CPSP president Dr. James Gebhart, a United Methodist minister, gave a laudable, rare, prophetic speech on the U.S.’s illegal invasion of Iraq. Instead of confining his president’s

address to an expected discussion of supervising theological students—“You already know what I’m going to say,” he said—he talked about a critical need: “our supervision of this nation. . . . That terrible war, that moral abyss to which we have sunk. A misguided policy of leaders who arrogantly pronounced that the Near East eagerly awaited the messianic democracy of Americans. Manifest destiny all over again. . . .” (“Dr. James Gebhart 2007 CPSP Presidential Address,” [YouTube](#))

CPSP has not only has embraced diversity, now a popular virtue of religious groups; its leadership has extended the meaning of such inclusiveness to include the right of same-sex persons to marry. *Before* the U.S. Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage, then CPSP president Rev. Brian Childs, Ph.D. and Rev. Raymond Lawrence, General Secretary issued a “Commitment to Marriage Equality” supporting the equal right of same-sex couples to enjoy civil marriage. (“Commitment to Marriage Equality,” CPSP Public Declaration, *Pastoral Report*, March 14, 2013) Also, CPSP General Secretary Lawrence recently issued a call to “all in the CPSP community to reach out in collegially and solidarity with members of the Muslim community in the face of the current irrational public outrage directed at Muslims as a whole.” (“A Call for Action,” *Pastoral Report*, Dec. 11, 2011) And, references to certain of my *Counterpunch* articles on the morality of U. S. military interventions and other pieces on the humanness of same-sex love, have appeared in CPSP’s *Pastoral Report*, with links to the writings.

Not that these positions of the College of Pastoral Supervision and Psychotherapy leadership represent the consensus of its membership. A number of members have resigned, protesting positions on U.S. military intervention and human love that are contrary to their denomination’s beliefs. Others have also left, fearing the loss of jobs and ecclesiastical endorsement, as certain denominational leaders have threatened to withdraw support for CPSP. Sadly, many denominational leaders serve as guardians of the status quo, and can be counted on to keep their clergy in line—and to punish those whose morality leads them to challenge illegal military interventions that put soldiers in harm’s way, or the “*straight*”-jacketing of human love.

Thus, moral discussions with trainees initiated by interfaith clinical pastoral training organizations, like the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education, are determined by the doctrines of the denominational bodies and seminaries that supply them with the trainees. Moral discussions about providing effective spiritual care for soldiers in harm’s way and for “wounded warriors” is one thing. The moral questioning of political and military decisions that put them in harm’s way is quite another. Similarly, embracing the diversity of people is a clinical pastoral training value, but not the natural application of the value of diversity to love and marriage between same-sex persons.

Dr. Childs, a Presbyterian minister, provides a helpful commentary here. A Marine veteran with combat experience who supervises military chaplains, he says about the importance of discussing “moral and ethical reflection” with them, “I think moral deliberation about war and oppression for wealth is patriotic.” (Personal communication.)

The United States is in desperate moral straits today. At this very moment, fear- and war-mongering presidential candidates are competing to see which one can repeat “Radical Islamic

Terrorists!” the most, and warn against taking in Syrian and other refugees. Never mind that the criminal military interventions of *radical white Christian terrorists* helped to lay the foundation for the rise of ISIS and the horrific numbers of people forced to flee their countries as refugees.

America desperately needs chaplains of the people, not empire. Chaplains who follow in the footsteps of their great moral authority who taught, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.” (*Matthew* 5: 9) Chaplains also guided by the prophet who dared to ask—and answer—the moral question, “With what shall I come before God on high? . . . He had 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?” (*Micah* 6: 6-8)

Congregations, their religious bodies, seminaries and related interfaith clinical pastoral training organizations have the moral power to help end America’s criminal– and homeland-threatening–military interventions. *By refusing to participate in them.* Armed with the moral empathy of the Golden Rule that knows no religious, racial or national borders.