

Religious Education and the Chaplain's Role

by LCdr Carol Bateman

The role of Religious Education (RE) in countering religious extremism is a concept with which a chaplain employed with the Canadian Armed Forces should be familiar. Any chaplain who has deployed with Canadian troops in the last decade has been exposed to soldiers working with Army programs such as Psychological Operations (PsyOps), Influence Activities, and Canadian Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) work as well as chaplain developed Religious Leader Engagement (RLE) and Religious Area Assessment (RAA) practices. Each of these programs uses an educational approach in countering the messages of extremism (CVE). Drawing from established CAF resources and gaining awareness of the variety of successful RE and CVE programs, chaplains provide valuable insight as 'force multipliers' in missions seeking to reduce conflict, improve understanding and build peace.

For CAF members directly involved in a conflict, the chaplain presents a human face in the midst of an inhuman situation. Within the framework of 'winning hearts and minds' in a conflict, a chaplain presents a person with no combat role who can be of assistance in building relationships with locals. In both combat and peace building situations, religious education plays a role and this is one area in which the chaplain becomes a force multiplier.¹ A CAF chaplain's role as religious subject matter expert (SME) allows them to be a source of support to soldiers and commanders seeking to reduce conflict and develop a more stable environment within their area of responsibility. A chaplain should have an awareness of and, where possible, cooperate in

¹ A capability that, when added to and employed by a combat force, significantly increases the combat potential of that force and thus enhances the probability of successful mission accomplishment.

both CAF and civilian programs designed to help communities in conflict and reduce overall radicalization efforts.

Diana Eck, Professor of Comparative Religions at Harvard University, has worked since the early 1990's in the field of pluralism. According to Eck, pluralism is not simply experiencing diversity in a given community, but involves active engagement with that diversity in seeking to know the 'other' through intentional interaction. She sees pluralism being experienced successfully when people of faith – or those of no faith – can be themselves while engaging in the creation of a civil society. Eck's proposal of *E Pluribus Unum*, "out of many, one," envisions one people, with a common sense of a civic "we" (Eck, 2). This line of thinking fits with CAF activities which work within an area experiencing conflict, often with the issues of pluralism and violent extremism, that have resulted in the breakdown of a peaceful society. The following will focus on the two most recent extremist-based conflicts in which the CAF was active, those being of Bosnia (1992-95) and Afghanistan (2000-2011).

Similar to Professor Eck's belief that programs should nurture constructive dialogue to encourage common understandings, make a real differences and encourage the establishment (or re-establishment) of a civil society (Eck, 3), CAF specialized units work to plan, create and deliver "[messages that resonate](#)." As Moore explains, "Military leaders increasingly acknowledge the strategic merit of building rapport and establishing cooperation with the religious segment of society as being critical to the accomplishment of mission mandates" (Moore, 43). It is under Commanders' authority and in accordance with their intent that

chaplains contribute to meeting these operational objectives through engaging religious leaders and their faith group communities.

To be amongst the community, to share resources and health care, to help them to develop and support themselves in seeing that life can be different is perhaps a more realistic way of challenging the negative influences that would see communities support radical activities. This line of thinking is echoed by Major M. Graham who has noted that “[t]o simply go to meetings and to try to build friendships without being able to pragmatically help solve the issues can create frustration and distrust on the part of the local inhabitants” (Longhurst, 57). Graham goes on to share his first-hand observation that “when conducted in an impartial, neutral, and independent manner in the eyes of the national authorities and the local population, CIMIC is a force multiplier, not only for the military but also for civilian organizations working towards common goals” (Longhurst, 57). This type of work requires a continual awareness on the part of the team as to how they are being perceived by the local population. As Peter Neumann notes, words from those in authority do not hold much weight if the reality on the ground is different. Part of what will make any PsyOps or CIMIC operation successful is an education in, and appreciation for, the religious values and systems in place and their importance in the community. CAF chaplain Major (Ret.) Steven Moore observes “Networking, partnering, and, in some instances, peacebuilding endeavours among local clerics have proven to be effective means to garnering the much-needed trust of these revered community leaders” (Moore, 43). Respect for tradition and practices, when balanced with safety for CAF members, will reflect a sincere attitude toward common goals.

It is through experiences such as seeking to assist with community needs that the chaplain role in Operations has grown to include Religious Leader Engagement (RLE) and Religious Area Assessment (RAA). In his book *Military Chaplains as Agents of Peace*, Moore develops the thesis that chaplains can, within the right environment, “foster trust building through dialogue that facilitates inter-religious encounter among estranged faith community leaders for the sake of mutual re-humanizing and community building” (Moore, 46). A veteran of deployments in Bosnia and Afghanistan, Moore found chaplains to be most effective when they were working with needs identified by the community, with activities promoting peace and reconciliation, and when creating opportunities for inter-communal collaboration (Moore, 46). RLE has proven a successful form of civic engagement in both active conflict zones and peace support operations. In Afghanistan, this was demonstrated through an emphasis on stability and reconstruction, and in Bosnia, once cease-fires occurred, RLE played a role in enforcing newly-formed peace agreements between former combatants (Moore, 40).

The importance of the chaplain as a force multiplier, and indeed the role of any of the above mentioned programs and agencies, developed as the result of the recognition of the importance of education in reducing situations of conflict and poverty. The United Nations’ [Universal](#)

[Declaration of Human Rights](#) (1948), in the final paragraph of its Preamble, states:

...every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by *teaching and education* to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction (emphasis added).

Article 26 of the same document states that elementary education should be available as a minimum for all, and that higher learning, including technical and professional opportunities,

should exist widely. The article claims that education contributes significantly to the full development of the human personality through strengthening respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, promoting understanding, tolerance and friendship among nations, racial or religious groups.

Religious Education plays a key role in countering religious extremism. It occurs in many ways around the world, with varying levels of success. The Canadian Armed Forces has developed programs over the years that have produced positive results in areas where conflict has been experienced. Through these conflicts, the role of the chaplain as Subject Matter Expert has enhanced the peace-building / peace-making capacity of many missions. It is incumbent on chaplains and Influence Activity groups within the CAF to keep abreast of CVE programs experiencing success and to work to include these types of programs, as applicable, within our existing structure.

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