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Africa and the Case for "External Religious Advisement" as a Core Religious Support Capability

The Decline of External Religious Advisement

Chaplains have two primary roles in the Army. (Department of the Army, 2015) The first role is to be a Professional Military Religious Leader. The "Religious Leader" role encompasses the most popular notions of what chaplains do such as providing counseling to Soldiers, conducting worship services in the field, and leading memorial ceremonies. The second role is to function as a Professional Military Religious Advisor. The "Religious Advisor" role requires chaplains to provide expert advisement to commands on the religion, ethics, morals, and morale within the unit – a function called "internal religious advisement". (Department of the Army, 2019) Another function, called "external religious advisement" requires the chaplain to advise the command on the impact of indigenous religions on operations. (Department of the Army, 2019) External Religious Advisement (ERA) answers the question, "What are the possible and likely impacts of local religious beliefs, institutions, and leaders on US Army operations?"

While ERA is a key component of religious support capabilities doctrinally, anecdotal evidence suggests that it is a capability that generally collects dust on the bookshelf like an out of date Field Manual. The Global War on Terror (GWOT), with its focus on nations with nearly monolithic religious environments for over 20 years, put ERA on a back burner. The analysis was already done. It has already been briefed. There was nothing left for the chaplain to do but focus on direct religious support. However, when future operations take us to locations with unfamiliar and complex religious environments, the External Religious Advisement role of the Religious Support Team (RST) will gain a renewed sense of importance. While there may be

intelligence analysts who can report on culture and religion, and CIA World Book articles that can give facts concerning the religious environment, these are just raw data points. How do these facts about area religions get distilled into a meaningful understanding of their potential impact on operations and related to commanders as actionable recommendations? Who has the capability of reading between the lines in terms of religious institutions, of understanding the nuances of religious culture, and is a position to approach religious leaders as another religious leader? The chaplain.

Africa as a Case-Study for the ERA Capability

Considering the outsized influence of Africa on world religions – and the influence of religion on the African continent – Africa provides an excellent case study for exploring the importance of External Religious Advisement as a key component of US Army Religious Support capabilities. The African continent is a complex landscape politically, economically, and culturally. Africa is no less complex in its religious landscape, and therefore the impact of religion on operations in Africa would require careful and in-depth analysis in order to be useful to commanders.

The enormity of the African continent is staggering. Many people, based on impressions from the skewed perspective of flattened-earth maps, have no idea that the contiguous United States, China, India, and the majority of Europe can fit into the African land mass (Fischetti, 2016). Even when seeing this fact depicted on proportional, overlaid maps it is a difficult reality to grasp. In a similar manner, it is easy to underestimate the size of Africa's influence on cultures around the world. Included in Africa's world-wide cultural influence is Africa's influence on world religions. There is deep and complex interconnectivity between both Africa's

influence on religion and the influence of religion in Africa, which must be understood as part of the tapestry of issues surrounding military engagements on the continent.

The continent of Africa has ancient, historic connections to the world's three great Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. For Judaism, Northeast Africa factors largely in the "birth-narrative" of the Israelite people. According to the Biblical narrative, the Jewish Patriarch, Jacob, who is also named Israel, moved with his family into Egypt as refugees from famine. Over several centuries, his descendants became numerous enough to cause the Egyptian rulers concern, and thus begins to story of the birth of Israel as a distinct people. During the Middle-Ages, groups of Jews began to move into Northern Africa and develop numerous communities across the region, and within the first one hundred years of the birth of Islam, communities had already been established in Africa (Curtin, Feirerman, Thompson, & Vansina, 1995).

Africans also factor in prominent and important roles in the Biblical narrative of the beginnings of Christianity. The man who was conscripted to carry Christ's cross to the execution site was from African city of Cyrene. In the Acts of the Apostles, one reads of the conversion of an Ethiopian court official under Queen Candice. Extremely influential early Christian thinkers also hailed from Africa. Among these is Saint Augustine, from modern day Algeria, who is considered the father of Just War theory which factors prominently in military ethics (Tornau, 2020). Illustrating the far reaching influence of this African philosopher and theologian, Tornau (2020) points out that, "…impact of his views on sin, grace, freedom and sexuality on Western culture can hardly be overrated."

African influence on world religion, however, is not confined to ancient history. In fact, African culture and spirituality are conspicuously influential in the modern, Western experience

of Christianity. The slave trade of the 18th and 19th Centuries saw millions of Africans exported to the West, and these people brought with them a spiritual way of viewing the world and a unique way of expressing this view. As these people gradually adopted Christianity in the Americas, African spirituality and religious practices were carried over into a new religious culture. The "Azuza Street Revival" of 1906 in Las Angeles, California, which marked the beginning of modern Pentecostalism, was led by William J. Seymour, an African American preacher and son of ex-slaves. This movement became a world-wide phenomenon which introduced many Christianized aspects of traditional African spirituality into Christian culture at large. These influences include music styles, liturgical use of music, preaching styles, listening styles, and even body postures during worship services. Many aspects of modern, contemporary style worship services that distinguish them stylistically from traditional, mainline protestant services can be traced through Azuza Street right back to the African continent.

Just as religion in the West was influenced by African culture and beliefs right down to current times, religion has also played a significant role in African history and society. Africa has long been seen as an ultimate prize in proselytizing religions. Early proselytizing efforts were confined to the regions closest to the seat of world dominating empires – the north along the Mediterranean. Outside religious influence in Africa truly comes to prominence in a pan-continental form during the colonial years (Curtin, Feirerman, Thompson, & Vansina, 1995). European powers sought to exploit Africa for its wealth of natural resources at a time when a renewal of missionary theology was occurring in Western churches. The result was a massive missionary effort by Europeans extending across the African continent. This effort created a lasting influence on the religious landscape in Africa, with many new denominations that are native to Africa as well as the ongoing, indigenous versions of world-wide mainline

denominations. In addition to the mutual cultural influence of Africa and prominent world religions, one must also consider the range of traditional African religious beliefs. Even as Islam and Christianity spread across the continent through proselytizing efforts, traditional African religious beliefs informed – and continue to inform – social and political experience (Ibenwa, 2014). Clearly, the religious landscape in Africa is both complex and influential.

<p style="text-align:center;">SETAF-AF Chaplain Section Approach to ERA Capability</p>

To this point, we have dealt with Africa as a monolith and in generalized terms. However, it is vital to remember that Africa is a continent, not a country. It is made up of 1.2 billion people who speak over 2500 different languages and live in more than 50 countries (Africa, 2021). And cultural, linguistic, and religious lines cross geopolitical borders marked on maps. The religious landscape forms a complex web of interconnected official and folk theology, doctrines, practices, and views that cannot be easily categorized onto an easily digestible one-page slide for a chaplain to brief a commander. The Southern European Task Force, Africa (SETAF-AF) Chaplain Section is responsible for external advisement on the impact of religion on operations. Hopefully, the reader understands the enormity of this task given the complex nature and influential status of religion on the African continent. In order to keep the Advisement capability up-to-date and ready to be put into use at any moment requires a whole-team approach by the chaplain section that is both "down-and-in" as well as "up-and-out." There are three lines of effort associated with this task: build and maintain accurate, up-to-date Religious Area Analysis; cultivate relationships with religious leaders on the continent; and staff integration.

The Religious Area Analysis (RAA) is a product that every US Army Chaplain and Religious Affairs Specialist is capable of producing by doctrine. The RAA is usually

painstakingly researched, written up in a ten to twelve page document, distilled down to one or two bullets for an MDMP product, then left collecting dust in a folder buried somewhere on SharePoint. The real challenge is not producing an initial RAA, but in keeping the RAAs up-to-date. Religious demographics change. Relative influence of religious beliefs and leaders change. The religious leaders themselves change. It does not take long for information in an RAA to become obsolete. In the case of Africa, there are more than 50 different countries to study. In order to effectively maintain External Religious Advisement capability, reviewing and updating RAAs for the unit's AOR should be a regular event – like "motor-pool Mondays" for PMCSing vehicles. Countries need to be prioritized to nest with the Commander's priorities with consideration of where religion would have the greatest impact on operations.

Another aspect of developing and maintaining external advisement capability is the cultivation of relationships with area religious leaders. This enables a deeper understanding of the nuances of religious culture, institutions, and influence in a particular area. It also leads to greater insights on the needs and concerns of the people in an area. For the SETAF-AF Chaplain Section, this is accomplished through Military to Military (M2M) engagements with African military chaplaincies. While M2M engagements with African chaplains accomplish multiple goals such as building interoperability capability with partners in the region, they also create opportunities for valuable insight into the influence of religion and religious institutions in an area. This firsthand knowledge is something that can never be gained through reading books and articles, so M2M engagements form a key component in the SETAF-AF Chaplain Section's external advisement capability.

The finest, most-brilliant, in-depth analysis of the religious environment and potential impacts of religion on operations in a particular area is utterly useless unless there exists a

system of delivering it to the right people at the right time. In order to deliver the "so what" and "now what" of the RAA, staff integration is non-negotiable for the SETAF-AF Chaplain Section. Realistically, Chaplain Section personnel number too few to support every working group, staff meeting, and OPT. Instead, it carefully chooses which staff integration touch points are most likely to require religious support capabilities, including External Religious Advisement, and which staff touch points are required for planning and resourcing direct religious support. The bottom line for RSTs is that without staff integration, to include developing and maintaining positive inter-personal relationships with leaders in other sections, External Religious Advisement will lack the delivery mechanism necessary for its utility.

Conclusion – ERA as Strategic Level Religious Support

Direct Religious Support and Religious Advisement are the Army Chaplain Corps cornerstone capabilities. In practice, the priority is on Direct Religious Support – and rightly so. Chaplains are remembered by their Soldiers for "tactical Religious Support." A survey of American battlefield monuments dedicated to chaplains would clearly indicate that chaplains are not remembered for their staff work but for their personal and pastoral ministry to troops in the worst of conditions. However, at echelons placing chaplains farther away from face-to-face direct Religious Support, the Advisement capability begins to grow in its importance. At a strategic level, is it possible that a senior leader without a clear understanding of how the religious environment impacts, and is impacted by, a particular military operation could make decisions that unnecessarily cause risk to mission? If the culture, beliefs, and attitudes of local populations in theater affect the mission, then the answer is clearly, "yes." In the light of this reality, the easy-to-forget capability of External Religious Advisement grows in importance, and at echelons above brigade truly becomes a key Religious Support Team capability.

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