The Role of Religion in Information Operations

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"The easy confidence with which I know another man's religion is folly teaches me to suspect that my own is also." -Mark Twain

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Opinions abound regarding what motivates insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan. Some discuss the issue in detail without mentioning religion. Others blame religious intolerance directly. Whichever side of the argument one takes, religious certainty and the confidence it breeds impedes progress toward peaceful coexistence. Religious factors effect military information operations (IO), but by what means should these factors be addressed? Acceptance of, real respect for, and eventual military cooperation with individuals of different faiths requires very liberal interpretations of one's own religious doctrine. There is nothing more difficult than convincing a person to doubt something he or she needs to believe. The U.S. Military Chaplain Corps could potentially lead the way, but first they must be screened to ensure they are willing and able to set aside their own personal religious certainty and to make liberal interpretations of their doctrine in favor of that end.

What is the problem?

Religion, and specifically Christianity, is unwavering in its doctrinal requirement for absolute faith from its flock. Doubt is sufficient grounds to secure a place in hell. The degree to which a person is certain of the truth

of his or her religion's message is the ultimate measure of
likelihood to get into heaven. It is not deeds, but it is
sincere acceptance of Jesus Christ (to Christians) as lord
and savior that will be awarded with eternal life. There
is an obvious conflict of interest when one considers a
chaplain's requirement to believe that his or her God is
the one true path to heaven while sincerely advocating
respect for people who believe in other Gods. H.L. Menken
said "we must respect the other fellow's religion, but only
in the sense and to the extent that we respect his theory
that his wife is beautiful and his children smart." To do
this sincerely, exceptions must be made. Credulity cannot
be absolute.

Chaplains do surprisingly well.

Within a given organization, chaplains successfully
manage to provide one-on-one *spiritual* guidance to people
of all faiths. During large gatherings, however, where
attendance is often mandatory, chaplains alienate members
of other faiths and boldly affirm the organization's
Christianity. Surely they mean well, but in their attempts
to cater to the majority, chaplains are often a party to
the perpetuation of the Christian attitude of supremacy
that permeates the U.S. military, and they miss an

opportunity to foster enhanced understanding and tolerance. The mere mention of the Christian God, indeed prayer in general, will invariably alienate some of those in mandatory attendance. To imagine the alienation and to view the issue from a non-Christian perspective, one need only imagine listening to a Muslim mullah delivering an Islamic blessing at the next change of command ceremony.

The problem is prevalent.

This ignorance of military multi-religiosity permeates all U.S. military organizations, and is largely unintended. There are Muslims in the Marine Corps, but one would never guess this was the case by the ridicule and condescension with which Islam is regarded by many public speakers who are given the privilege of addressing large crowds of service members. Radical Muslims are generally considered to be senseless and uneducated. Suicide bombers are regarded simply as insane, and for their belief in an afterlife full of virgins they are considered delusional. Videos of improvised explosive device (IED) detonations are viewed as appalling while U.S. weapon system footage that obliterates human bodies brings universal smiles to the faces of U.S. military viewers, and often even jubilant cheers. The more blood and guts the better, so long as it

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enemy guts. Americans, this American included, show no
remorse, and seem to find no comparison between themselves
and the barbaric insurgents. What is worse is that few
readers will have any issue with the hypocrisy described
thus far. Regardless of the justification, what have
professional fighting men and women become if in hindsight
they are not at least *openly*[1] regretful that a situation
called for killing?   What is the reason for this blindness
in the attitudes of U.S. military men and women, and how
can it be fixed?

The problem is religious certainty.

Chaplains are obviously welcome to their *personal*
religious certainty, as are individual military members,
but if that certainty can be found to conflict with what is
best for this nation, then a need for change will have been
highlighted. Chaplains should start by catering *publicly*
to men and women of varying *degrees* of faith, not just
varying faiths. They should admit that doubt is natural in
matters of religious faith. If any chaplain can be found
to have even so much as a slight conflict of interest, or
unwillingness to do this, then he or she should be

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[1] The writer has no illusions about the regrets service members often
keep to themselves.

concurrently found unsuitable to lead the charge in this country's quest for global religious harmony. To determine whether chaplains are up to the task, and if the task is even deserving of attention, one must first understand the situation.

What are we doing now, and is it the best we can do?

Current IO strategies advocate *conversion* of moderate Muslims to a more western ethos through the spread of democracy and capitalism, and destruction of radicals.[2] In this way, counterinsurgency operations (COIN) share a common desired end state with insurgent operations. Conversion of non-Muslims to Islamic faith is the radical Islamist's goal. That conversion, if not by cooperative means, can happen forcibly by killing the non-conformist in much the same way coalition forces destroy radicals. The result is that to the world the west appears to share the radical Muslim view that destruction and conversion are the only options for non-conformists, and what the world sees effectively equates to the U.S. strategic position. The U.S. should be able, at least, to initiate a higher level of discourse than the current supposed convert-or-die

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[2] Col Thomas X Hammes "The Message is Insurgency" Marine Corps Gazette. Nov 2007 Vol. 91 No. 11 Page 28 Figure 1

policy. Some parts of the world see only Christians
killing Muslims by the thousands, and it does not matter
whether or not the official U.S. position is that this is
Holy war. That is, beyond any doubt, the official radical
Islamic position.

What is strategic IO and why isn't anyone doing it?

Information operations are often under-planned and
largely misunderstood. Strategic communications has a
slant toward the strategic level of war and some consider
it more suited to the issue. Col Thomas X. Hammes, states
that "astute practitioners on both sides of the conflict
have reached the conclusion that the key weapon of
insurgency is a strategic communications campaign."[3] Often
what is employed under the guise of information operations
certainly is closer to the limited subcategory of strategic
communications, but strategic communications are not the
doctrinal foundation of a COIN operation. Currently, IO is
the doctrinal foundation of a COIN operation, and it should
remain as such.

The U.S. military's definition, or at least
employment, of IO has yet to be adequately established, so
significant room exists for improvement in strategic IO.

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[3] Hammes, 18

This does not mean that IO should be utterly replaced by

one of its many subcomponents. IO is defined as follows:

> The integrated employment of the core capabilities of
> electronic warfare, computer network operations,
> psychological operations, military deception, and
> operations security, in concert with specified
> supporting and related capabilities to influence,
> disrupt, corrupt or usurp adversarial human and
> automated decision making while protecting our own.[4]

Its doctrinal purpose is "to affect enemy decision makers

while protecting friendly decision makers from adversarial

influence."[5] So, on the surface IO has no vehicle for

strategic influence, a definition focused on tactical

elements, and a purpose lacking specific focus on any

particular level of war.

Only upon more in depth review of the core

capabilities does doctrinal guidance for strategic level IO

employment become clearer. The definition of psychological

operations offers one example. They are "planned

operations to convey selected information and indicators to

foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives,

objectives, reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of

foreign *governments*, *organizations*, *groups,* and

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[4] "Information Operations." *Joint Publication 3-13* February 2006: 112.
http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/jp3_13.pdf.
[5] *Joint Publication 3-13*, 88

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individuals."[6] Nothing is linked more directly than Islamic

faith to the emotions and motives of potentially

troublesome Muslim governments, organizations, groups, and

individuals.

Reinforce tactical successes and modern developments in the Muslim world with strategic IO.

Tactical successes are witnessed on the streets and in

the villages and marketplaces of Iraq and Afghanistan where

U.S. and coalition forces are gaining ground by touching

the lives of as many locals as possible. They directly

demonstrate western humanity and commonality. Recent Pew

poll results suggest Muslim support for suicide bombing in

defense of Islam has seen widespread and rapid decline. In

all areas where polling was allowed, except the Palestinian

territory, the number of Muslims who agreed that suicide

bombing was justified in defense or support of Islam is

lower this year than in 2002 by an average of approximately

25%. Unfortunately in Palestine support is still a

disturbing 70%.[7] [8] Never the less the preponderance of the

results appear to indicate spreading moderation in the

Muslim world. Yet to date there has been no public fatwa

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[6] Definition available at
http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/data/p/04364.html.
[7] See Figure 1
[8] Pew polling was not allowed in the most radical Muslim states.

issued against Osama Bin Laden by any Islamic mullah. Nor

has there been any public call for any such fatwa by an

American religious leader.

But religious beliefs are personal.

If one believes the polls, the majority of eastern and

western societies both still share a faith in a being

greater than themselves. And while one person's religious

faith is indeed a deeply personal matter, the religious

majority he or she contributes to has huge sway in matters

of national strategy and policy. IO doctrine already

accounts for this fact. "Service-wide training of military

personnel should account for the nature of the information

environment and the fact that the actions of individual

personnel can affect the perceptions of foreign

populations."[9] Significant common ground goes unnoticed

because religion usually is a conversation stopper between

people of different views. By openly admitting a small

amount of religious uncertainty, both parties may move one

step closer to peaceful coexistence, not to mention moving

closer to a more intellectually defensible stance on the

matter. While the execution of information operations

itself has yet to be mastered in the U.S. military, truly

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[9] *Joint Publication 3-13*, 73.

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learning more than one language of faith could help its

cause.

But socio-economic factors are more important.

The most tactically important factors are already

being addressed in the Global War on Terror. The link, in

a given region, between reduced insurgent violence and

increased gross domestic product cannot be denied, and that

bottom up approach is viable. These efforts are not met

with top down strategic reinforcement through religious

discourse that would serve to enhance the endurance of the

socio-economic successes. Such factors as jobs and

standards of living, while obviously immediate to the

tactical fight, are far less salient to the long war than

religious conviction. Suicide attacks are not confined to

the poor or uneducated. Fixing economies will not stop the

concept of martyrdom. Most of the September 11, 2001,

hijackers were college educated and financially well-

situated. Yet they did not hesitate to destroy themselves

in the name of their God and for the promise of post mortem

paradise. Without strategic efforts to sway radical

Islamic state policy makers, Imams, the U.S. should expect

long-term resurgences of violence in these regions. To do

this, U.S. strategists will have to put global opinion

ahead of U.S. voter opinion and develop new methods of
addressing religion.

The chaplains can't do it all.

Because of their own faith, chaplains must be
considered biased in an endeavor toward reaching religious
middle ground. It is perhaps also beyond the reach of the
Chaplain Corps to strategically exploit the emerging new
level of worldwide receptiveness to candid religious
discourse that has gone largely unnoticed. The previously
mentioned pew poll results are promising. Since 2002,
belief among Muslims that suicide bombings are justified
has dropped dramatically. This data must be studied, and
the cause must be understood and exploited. Whether or not
they answer "Christian" when polled, religion is not
central to the lives of westerners. Love it; hate it, or
choose to ignore it, religion weighs heavily on the minds
of would be insurgents and their leaders.

<div align="center">2002 Words</div>

Fewer Muslims View
Suicide Bombing as Justified

Often/ sometimes justified:	2002 %	2007 %	02-07 change
Lebanon	74	34	-40
Bangladesh	44	20	-24
Pakistan	33	9	-24
Jordan	43	23	-20
Indonesia	26	10	-16
Tanzania	18	11	-7
Nigeria	47	42	-5
Turkey	13	16	+3
Palestinian ter.	--	70	--
Mali	--	39	--
Malaysia	--	26	--
Kuwait	--	21	--
Ethiopia	--	18	--
Senegal	--	18	--
Morocco	--	11	--
Egypt	--	8	--

Based on Muslim respondents.

Figure 1

Diamond, Jared. *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999.

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