

# Military chaplains: Being a cog of conscience in the military killing machine

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Navy Capt. James Fisher brings his evangelical Christian faith to work with Afghan military mullahs.

By Lee Lawrence, Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor | NOVEMBER 20, 2007

Kabul, Afghanistan

It's the end of lunchtime at the Afghan National Army base of Pol-i-charkhi and, as the mess hall reverberates with the dish-clatter and chair-scraping of soldiers in dark camouflage dispersing, two men linger behind, still digging with spoons into a shared dish of rice and lamb.

US Navy Capt. James Fisher is the guest of Afghan Col. Moheb Moheburahman. The American is fair skinned, every inch of his face and scalp clean-shaven, and with ready smile and can-do attitude, he looks downright sunny. The Afghan has an olive complexion and a full black beard flecked with gray. When he laughs, the white of his teeth brightens his face like a flash of lightning in a night sky. The American has never borne arms in battle; the Afghan spent years in the mountains of northern Afghanistan fighting as a mujahideen against Russian occupiers and, later, against the Taliban. A limp in his walk and a cloudy left eye are leftovers from a Taliban ambush.

Both men are officers, both are clergy, and neither could have imagined joining forces when they made religion the cornerstone of their life and work: Colonel Moheburahman as an Islamic mullah trained in Kabul and now serving in the Afghan Army; Captain Fisher a born-again Christian ordained in the Evangelical Covenant Church and committed to ministering to American troops.

As they eat and talk, an interpreter in a gray suit and yellow tie bridges the linguistic divide through word and gesture. Nothing, not even the smiles and the ribbing, gets lost as the two discuss the transformation of the Religious Cultural Affairs (RCA) department of the Afghan Army into a professional military chaplaincy.

Against the complex backdrop of combat and nation-building, this is neither a simple task nor always an exciting one. "I bet that, 25 years ago, the colonel didn't say 'I want to be a staff officer,'" Chaplain Fisher jokes.

The colonel – or M-12, as Fisher nicknamed him when his tongue first tripped over the military mullah's name – nods, smiles. At one point he thanks Fisher for draft guidelines he sent over, but then he tilts his head back and pokes jokingly but pointedly: "The Americans are here and then they escape from us." A smile flashes across his face. "I don't know why."

Fisher laughs, but his eyes are serious as he explains why he "escapes" his Afghan counterparts: "Here at Pol-i-charkhi you have five to 10 RCA officers, and in the general area there are one or two American chaplains."

The shortage of US chaplains and the proliferation of US bases around Afghanistan means American chaplains can't embed with Afghan units the way engineers and combat specialists do.

"Our first priority is to the American troops," he explains. Though he doesn't spell it out, the implication is clear: Just by joining Moheburahman for lunch, Fisher is stepping outside the traditional role of ministering to troops and advising command. Yet in so doing, he is also affirming the value of the chaplaincy.

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US commanders have in past conflicts used chaplains to promote cooperation between local religious factions, and the US military chaplaincy has mentored and assisted chaplains of other nations throughout its history. But this is the first time US chaplains have helped establish a chaplaincy in an Islamic republic as part of a wider, nation-building effort. The result will be a chaplaincy radically different from their own. [**Editor's note:** *The original version stated that this was the first time US military chaplains have been used to mentor foreign military clergy. In fact, the US military chaplaincy has mentored and assisted chaplains of other nations throughout its history. This is, however, the first effort by US military chaplains to establish a chaplaincy in an Islamic republic as part of a wider, nation-building effort.*]

The Afghan Army, after all, serves the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, while American chaplains serve a secular command.

As such, US chaplains provide troops the opportunity to exercise their religion, while RCA officers actively encourage soldiers to perform the daily prayers and other requirements of Islam. Even more important to Afghan commanders, RCA officers counter Taliban propaganda by portraying the Afghan Army as an Islamic force.

"Our first priority," says Moheburahman, "is to let Afghans know that we are Muslim and that we want freedom inside an Islamic framework."

This not only attracts recruits, it lights their warrior fire.

"The most effective thing that can persuade Muslims to do dangerous things and to fight," Moheburahman explains, "is to give them the legitimacy of what they are fighting for. I describe the legitimacy of this government and point to verses [in the Koran]."

To formalize the RCA, Fisher succeeded in getting the US government to earmark \$2 million for a chaplain school, construction of which is scheduled to begin in 2008. And he is working on a curriculum that will teach mullahs how to work within a bureaucracy and provide religious support and moral guidance.

While Fisher understands that he's helping to build an Islamic military, he believes that Afghanistan's minority religions will grow as the country evolves. "There are Buddhists, Jews, Christians in Afghanistan – not in great numbers, but they're here," he says, "and they will make their way into the Army and at some point the institutions will have to wrestle with these issues."

Whether or not the curriculum addresses this head-on, Fisher likes to think that, through example, US military chaplains are "living, breathing witnesses to how [plurality] can work and that the RCA will pick up on that."

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This is the latest chapter in a journey that began when Fisher, a fresh, born-again Christian, was walking across the drill field at Virginia Tech Institute with a slide rule in his pocket.

"No way I want to be an engineer," he realized. "I want to be involved in a Christian vocation – chaplain, missionary, Christian teacher...."

Because his father was an Air Force pilot, Fisher signed up with the Air Force Reserve. Then he had second thoughts.

"I wanted to be with warriors in their hour of greatest need – and what is that? When they face death," he says. In the Air Force, chaplains typically stay back at the base. "But in the Navy," he explains, "if the ship sinks, most of us Christian chaplains are not going to be walking across the water back to shore. Or if you're with the Marines [whose chaplains are Navy officers], you're in their fighting hole with them."

He switched branches.

Today's wartime reality isn't as dramatic as the young Fisher imagined it. Ships don't sink on a daily basis, and marines don't live in foxholes. And if Fisher, like many new chaplains, signed up for drama and action, he has found instead that rubbing shoulders with other faiths has given him another kind of courage – the courage to ask questions.

"When I was a young Christian," he explains, "I thought it was very black and white – heaven, hell. As I get older, boy, I struggle with that more and more." He pauses, thinking about M-12 and the other mullahs he has come to respect. "If you bluntly ask me the question, 'Are Muslims going to hell,' " he says of the tenet – central to many Christian denominations – that eternal salvation comes only through Christ. "I'm not so quick to answer in the affirmative because I know that I see people here who practice justice, fairness, respect, dignity – who practice God's principles.

"Many of them," he adds, "are seeking a deeper, spiritual walk with God. And I believe that the person who seeks the depth of God and God's grace will also find the mercy that God offers."

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The day after lunch with Moheburahman, Fisher hosts a Protestant service back at Camp Eggers, a guarded US military compound in Kabul. His guest speaker is John Weaver, an American relief worker and graduate of Columbia International University, a Christian college in South Carolina where Mr. Weaver took classes specifically geared to helping him reach and convert Muslims. Bearded, barefoot, and wearing a tunic, Weaver does what Fisher can't: he proselytizes.

Ironically, this is what Fisher is equipping RCA officers to do, thus indirectly helping to spread Islam. As a Christian who believes "Christ makes a difference in people's lives," this stirs up questions Fisher hasn't yet fully answered. But he seems to relish the challenge: "I personally like people to wrestle with all kinds of thoughts and issues."

One thing Fisher has no questions about, however, is the value of military chaplains, no matter their denomination. He believes they provide a moral keel – and that no one wants to see a killing machine without a conscience.

"If there are no chaplains, then I think you're going to see the American military lose their humanity, and the American people do not, they do not," he repeats, tapping finger on knee for emphasis, "want a military that has lost its humanity, its integrity, its value system, its honor – because any military that loses that becomes a military that [can] turn against its own people."

He points to failed states where armies back dictators as examples of what could happen elsewhere, be it Afghanistan or the US.

"In the blink of an eye chaos can affect a community, a culture, a society – and that's why you don't want a military that has lost its humanity. The aftermath could be horrendous."

•On Nov. 27: Part 5. Army Chaplain Ron Eastes, a Presbyterian pastor on patrol – unarmed – with his Airborne Infantry flock in Iraq.

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