Love and Faith at War: Reflections on a Platoon Commander in Fallujah
Christopher J. Eberle with Tom Robertson and Tim Strabbing[1]

1.0 Introduction. The public culture of liberal democracies like the United States include a number of 'platitudes' about the proper political role of religion. One of those platitudes has to do with the relation between religion and war, viz., that 'mixing' religion and war leads to moral horror. When combatants are motivated to fight by their religious faith, when political communities construe violent military conflict in religious terms, when 'religion' intrudes upon 'war,' we can expect only moral atrocity. Hence the familiar parade of horribles: the Crusades, the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries, 9/11. I am sceptical: the religious is internally complex; war is as well; we should not expect the proper relations between religion and war to be regulated by simplistic claims decrying any influence of religion on war; nor should we expect the truth about religion and war to be accurately characterized by a narrative depicting a series of religiously motivated atrocities. My scepticism in this respect is grounded on a whole host of historical, philosophical, sociological, and theological considerations. Articulating those considerations would take a tome. In lieu of that more substantial treatment, I want to provide initial grounds for scepticism by reflecting on a particular case, one that I lay out in some detail. I think that reflection on that one case indicates just how subtly, and yet consequentially, the religious can relate to the martial. I hope that it also provides some indication – though hardly a demonstration! – that we have excellent reason to abandon familiar prejudicial platitudes about religion and war. We should at least be far more careful in our formulations than many are.

2.0 A Platoon Commander at Fallujah. In the spring semester of 2007, I helped to deliver a course on "The Ethics of Killing in War" to 14 Midshipmen at the United States Naval Academy. 7 had been selected to serve as Navy Seals, 6 to serve as Marine officers, and so most of the students in the class expected to be deployed in combat zones in the relatively near future. Fortunately for them, I delivered that course with 5 other instructors – a military lawyer, a Navy Seal, two Marines recently returned from Iraq, and a retired Surface Warfare Officer. We were able to reflect on any number of moral difficulties with a seriousness of purpose, not to mention a wealth of practical wisdom, not ordinarily achieved in philosophy seminars … not mine at least. Given the two wars that the United States was then actively prosecuting, we were easily able to invite a number of combat veterans to speak to our class. One of the most memorable was Tim Strabbing, a 2001 graduate of the Naval Academy who deployed twice as a Marine infantry officer to the Anbar province of Iraq between 2004 and 2006. He was not much older than my students when he participated in Operation AL FAJR, the November, 2004 assault on Fallujah, as a Platoon Commander in India Company, 3rd Battalion, First Marines – one of the most decorated units in

[1]. A brief note about the curious manner in which this essay is written. I originally drafted this essay by relying on my recollection of conversations with Tim Strabbing some 12 years ago. But I recently had the good fortune to reconnect with Tim, to check my memories, and to gain a much deeper understanding of the circumstances in which he found himself in November 2004. As a result, I have liberally interspersed comments by Tim throughout the essay. Similarly for inputs by CAPT Tom Robertson. Both of their contributions have been crucially important; as a civilian with no military experience, there is no option but to rely on the tactical and professional wisdom of experienced military officers. So this paper is a joint product of Tim, Tom, and Chris. Even so, all first person references apply to Chris alone.

US military history.[2] He had only recently returned to the Naval Academy as an instructor and wanted to pass on to current Midshipmen the wisdom he had gleaned from his own experience of combat.

2.1 Questions About a Mosque Shooting. Strabbing began by bringing our attention to an engagement that caused considerable controversy after an exceedingly troubling video made its way onto CNN and other media outlets. An embedded journalist, Kevin Sites, recorded a Marine corporal just as he was shooting an Iraqi who had been wounded the day before in a fire fight with another unit.[3] The wounded Iraqi is unarmed, supine, inert, and so apparently no threat. The corporal fires from a distance of no more than 10 feet. Strabbing shows up in the video shortly after the corporal shoots. Judging just from the video, it seems that Strabbing happened upon a cold-blooded murder.[4] But as is often the case in combat, matters are not nearly so simple and straightforward as they initially appear. How so?

The corporal recorded in the video was aware of reports that several Marines had been killed the day before by an insurgent who had pretended to be dead and then detonated explosives hidden in his clothes. Combat soldiers are trained to judge 'hostile act or intent,' and thereby to identify legitimate targets, in light of known enemy tendencies, tactics, and procedures. The corporal claimed that his target only pretended to be incapacitated: in the video, he shouts "he's faking it" prior to firing. Given the reported enemy tactic, faking incapacitation significantly raised the probability that the wounded Iraqi posed a deadly threat. Of course, he might not have been faking it – perhaps he just flinched. Or he might have pretended for some reason that had nothing to do with any intention to set off hidden explosives; there are benign explanations for a wounded individual to pretend to be dead. Nevertheless, soldiers often have to employ lethal violence without being able to verify with anything near certainty that their target poses a lethal threat. They weigh probabilities, the probabilities are often inscrutable, and the 'unforgiving minute' in which they find themselves doesn't afford them the luxury of inaction.[5] The corporal videotaped by Sites had likely made just this kind of forced judgment many times before and without incident. In this case, however, he killed an incapacitated human being – though one who

---

[2]. For background on 3/1, you can watch the beginning of "Rules of Engagement," **Frontline**, accessible at https://www.pbs.org/video/frontline-rules-of-engagement/.

[3]. The Marine corporal who shot the wounded Iraqi was temporarily attached to his unit – a scout sniper from another company.

[4]. You can see the unedited video here: http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=dbef3b6991. Sites discusses the video and the context in which he shot it at "Shooting Video:: Kevin Sites and the Siege of Fallujah, Part I," accessible at https://vimeo.com/73437259, and "Shooting Video:: Kevin Sites and the Siege of Fallujah, Part II," accessible at https://vimeo.com/73438938.

[5]. The reference here is to Craig Mullaney's **The Unforgiving Minute: A Soldier's Education**, (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2010). To get a sense for the uncertainties associated with applying the relevant moral and legal principles, see Dexter Filkins' account of one legal advisor's brief on the rules of engagement prior to the assault on Fallujah, **The Forever War**, (New York, NY: Alfred A Knopf Publishers, 2008), pp. 186-88. See also Donovan Campbell, **Joker One: A Marine Platoon's Story of Courage, Leadership, and Brotherhood**, (New York, NY: Random House, 2009) , Chapter 7; Hans Halberstadt, **Trigger Men: Shadow Team, Spider Man, the Magnificent Bastards, and the American Combat Sniper**, (St. Martin's Griffin, 2009), pp. 255-58; Patrick Bury, **Callsign Hades: An Irish Platoon Commander in the Most Dangerous Place on Earth**, (London: Simon and Shuster, 2010), throughout.

only the day before might well have been trying his level best to kill the corporal and his compatriots.

Strabbing used the video to raise several issues with the future officers in my class. The first, and most obvious, had to do with the permissibility of the killing: granted that combat soldiers often cannot achieve certainty prior to deploying lethal violence, did the corporal have sufficient reason under the circumstances to believe that the wounded Iraqi posed a threat that permitted the use of lethal violence? The second had to do with Strabbing's obligations as an officer: given that he strongly suspected that the corporal's appeal to the 'fog of war' was a mere rationalization for murder, should Strabbing confront the corporal and insist that he exercise greater restraint? Should he initiate legal action that might deprive him of a valuable 'asset' while in the midst of exceptionally brutal urban combat? What message would be sent to his platoon by a failure to take stern measures? Would the prospect of legal action against the corporal induce other unit members to hesitate when they should not?[6] The third also had to do with his responsibilities as a leader of a combat platoon: given that one of the primary functions of an officer in combat is to direct and coordinate the lethal violence deployed by subordinates, and given that his subordinates often had to deploy lethal violence in conditions of considerable uncertainty, how should Strabbing have directed his subordinates to act? When they were uncertain as to whether some potential target was an armed and hostile insurgent or a harmless non-combatant, what general, tactical policy should he have expected his subordinates to obey?

2.2 Tactical Policies in Conditions of Inscrutable Uncertainty. It turns out that Strabbing faced this last question throughout his service as a platoon leader in Fallujah (and, indeed, throughout his two deployments to Iraq). In order to ascertain how that question pressed on Strabbing, and in order to understand the considerable disagreement elicited by Strabbing's answer to that question, it will be helpful to give a bit of background on Operation AL FAJR. The U.S. Military had attempted to root insurgents out of Fallujah in April, 2004, but this attempt ended absent success: plagued by the 'CNN effect,' the rumor and reality of the suffering inflicted on the citizens of Fallujah had caused such unrest throughout Iraq that the operation was called off and 'control' over Fallujah given to a local militia. This proved utterly unworkable: given the attacks subsequently launched from Fallujah and the atrocities committed therein (the most infamous was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's video-taped beheading of Nicholas Berg), American soldiers and Marines were once again directed to take control of the city. They would have to do so by seizing it from insurgents who had spent months preparing for the impending attack.

The Americans launched their attack in November, 2004. But they had learned a number of

---

[6]. "What I did do after the corporal executed the wounded individual was to chew him and his team leader out, explain that they would not operate that way with my platoon. Some of my Marines certainly would have heard that heated interaction. But they also would not have been surprised, as they knew where I stood on excessive use of force. This was around day 6 or 7 of the fighting in Fallujah, so we had been in plenty of scrapes at that point." Tim Strabbing, Personal Communication. After the video was shown by Sites to Lt Gen Sattler, who had operational control over the assault on Fallujah, legal proceedings were initiated. Despite Strabbing's suspicions, the Marine corporal was not prosecuted for the shooting: the judgment was that the shooting was "consistent with the existing rules of engagement and law of armed conflict." "No Charges in Fallujah Shooting," cbsnews.com, Feb. 11, 2009, accessible at: http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/05/04/iraq/main693025.shtml.

important lessons from the earlier iteration, particularly regarding their handling of the civilian population. Most relevantly, they built a berm around the city, thereby facilitating control over ingress and egress, notified the population of the impending battle, encouraged its citizens to vacate, and allowed them weeks to do so. By the beginning of the operation, it is claimed, some 90% had taken the opportunity to leave – as did, unfortunately, some of the more infamous insurgents ... most notably Zarqawi.[7] Those who left would remain outside the city ... and away from the bloodbath looming on the horizon. The battle for Fallujah would occur between an estimated 2000-3000 insurgents and 6000 American combatants in a city mostly devoid of its original inhabitants. Unlike much urban combat, the hope was that taking control over Fallujah would require, not "war amongst the people," but combat in an abandoned city.[8] As one commentator put it, "because the city was almost completely free of non-combatants, [American soldiers and Marines] could spew out death and destruction with impunity."[9]

But Fallujah didn't fully empty out. For any number of reasons – fear of the Americans, desire to protect property, coercion by insurgents – some 30,000 non-combatants remained behind ... the "infirm and the elderly" as well as the enemy.[10] Consequently, American soldiers and Marines searching for insurgents often had no option but to exercise the kind of 'decision-making without certainty' that putatively led the corporal videotaped by Sites to kill an unarmed and wounded Iraqi. That is, they had to decide whether to direct lethal violence against targets the precise moral features of which were often inscrutable. Consequently, Strabbing had to adopt some tactical policy to guide such decisions as his platoon scoured the city, moving from house to house, compound to compound, looking to 'close with and destroy the enemy.'

Strabbing laid out the tactical options with which he was faced by reference to a generic case. Suppose that his platoon has been given the mission of killing and capturing insurgents in Fallujah. As a necessary means to that end, Strabbing must enter and search a succession of houses and compounds. They approach a particular house. It might be empty, it might be booby trapped, it might contain insurgents who have set up an ambush, it might contain some number of 'unwilling insurgents' who will fight in certain conditions but will surrender in others, and it might contain an unknown number of harmless and uninvolved non-combatants. Although Strabbing and his platoon must enter the house, they have no reliable way to determine which of these possibilities has been actualized. Given what they know, who and what lies in wait for them is simply inscrutable, such that they cannot rationally assign even the roughest of probabilities to

---

7. "As of early November, almost 90 percent of the population had left the city, thus creating a isolated urban battlefield in which Americans could liberally use their massive firepower." John C. McManus, **Grunts: Inside the American Infantry Combat Experience, World War II Through Iraq**, (New York, NY: NAL Caliber, 2010), p. 359.
8. Rupert Smith, **The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World**, (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2007), p. 267.
9. John C. McManus, **Grunts**, p. 370. During the November, 2004 attack on Fallujah, "the [Rules of Engagement] were liberal enough to be enthusiastically described by one Marine as 'like setting a bunch of fat kids loose in a candy store." Bill Ardolino, **Fallujah Awakens**, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2013), p. 57. "There was a strong undercurrent in Fallujah amongst Marines, including officers, that every living thing in Fallujah was declared hostile. Phrases like 'weapons free' and 'if it moves, it dies' were used with frequency." Tim Strabbing, Personal Communication.
10. Maj Gen Larry Nicholson, "Remembering Fallujah 10 Years Later," *Marine Corps Times*, 17 November, 2014, p. 22.

the various options.[11]

So circumstanced, Strabbing has a whole spread of resources at his disposal. For example,

(1) He can pull his unit back, order indirect fire from fixed wing aircraft or artillery at the house, have his Marines follow that up with grenades, and then have them enter to see if anyone inside is alive, killing the insurgents who resist, capturing any insurgents who surrender, and sparing any surviving non-combatants.

This is a very aggressive option. Here is another, somewhat less aggressive option:

(2) He can dispense with indirect fire and instead have tank rounds fired into the house, have his Marines follow that up with grenades, and then have them enter to see if anyone inside is alive, killing the insurgents who resist, capturing any insurgents who surrender, and sparing any surviving non-combatants.

Here is a third, rather more restrained option:

(3) He can dispense with indirect fire and tank rounds, and make do with only grenades, and then have his Marines enter to see if anyone inside is alive, killing the insurgents who resist, capturing any insurgents who surrender, and sparing any surviving non-combatants.

And a fourth even more cautious option:

(4) He can have his Marines enter the building without any preparatory indirect fire, tank shells or grenades, killing the insurgents who resist, capturing any insurgents who surrender, and sparing any surviving non-combatants.

(1), (2), (3), and (4) differ in a number of important respects. Given that indirect fire is often quite destructive, (1) poses the lowest risk to Strabbing's subordinates and the highest risk to any insurgents who would otherwise surrender as well as to any non-combatants who might be in the house. (2) is far less destructive than (1), but still considerably reduces the risk to Strabbing's platoon, not least because it helps them to avoid booby traps and ambushes that focus on fixed entry points. (3) poses less risk to any non-combatants who might be located in the house than either (1) or (2) and it also provides unwilling or vacillating insurgents with greater opportunity to surrender, while (4) imposes great risks on the members of his own unit but enables them better to determine who is in the house before deploying lethal violence. Basically, (1) is the safest policy for Strabbing and his platoon, provides little opportunity for surrender, and poses the greatest danger to non-combatants, whereas (4) is the safest policy for non-combatants, allows greater opportunity for surrender, and poses the greatest danger to Strabbing and his platoon. There are, of course, many other possible permutations.

---

[11]. To get a feel for the extreme danger involved in clearing a compound well-prepared by insurgents for the American assault, see David Bellavia's **House to House: An Epic Memoir of War**, (New York, NY: Free Press, 2007).

2.3 Faith, Love and Combat in Fallujah. There is no precise and uncontroversial way for a platoon commander to make this kind of tactical decision. Clearly, any sensible platoon commander will do so in light of a variety of distinct instrumental, legal, moral, and prudential considerations. Despite the unavoidable difficulty of any such determination, Strabbing had no option but to direct his subordinates to act. Moreover, given his role as a Marine officer, he possessed the normative authority to make it the case that his subordinates were morally required to comply with his determination as to how cautiously they would achieve their mission: by insisting that his subordinates follow a more or less cautious tactical policy, he could make it the case that they were morally and legally required to comply with such a policy. And he did exercise that authority. By his own accounting, the manner in which he did so was shaped by his religious commitments. That is the main focus of this short reflection.

Here, however, we must be careful not to construe Strabbing in light of prejudicial stereotypes that have wide play in popular culture and academic writing, viz., that of the blinkered fanatic mindlessly pursuing a religious agenda regardless of the cost and impervious to rational deliberation. Although Strabbing's religious convictions played a powerful role in shaping his command decisions in a most difficult operational environment, you will fail Strabbing utterly should you assume that his faith precluded him from giving due consideration to a variety of relevant factors. That would be a caricature: as with any decision to employ military violence in war, Strabbing's circumstances required him to accord due normative weight to instrumental reasons regarding how his platoon might efficiently achieve its assigned part of the overall mission, legal considerations regarding proper treatment of both combatants and non-combatants, military regulations that specify proper identification of legitimate targets, special obligations that bound him to bring his men home alive, a paternal responsibility to manage their moral well-being, and so on. Strabbing was committed to *including* his religious convictions as a factor in making command decisions, where including religion doesn't even slightly tend to exclude other relevant considerations of the sort just specified.

So, although willing to close with and destroy the enemy, committed to achieving the mission assigned to his platoon, and determined to exercise due care for the lives and well-being of his subordinates, Strabbing also took himself to be bound by a religiously grounded requirement to consider the worth of all human life, whether American or Iraqi. A faithful Christian, Strabbing was determined throughout the battle of Fallujah to adhere to Jesus' command that we love others as we love ourselves (Mark 12:31). Plausibly, Jesus' command that we love others obliges us to care about them, and so to care about how their lives go, and so to refrain from violating their rights.[12] Understood in the context of the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), that command has an indefinitely wide scope: we are commanded to care, not merely for the members of our set, ethnicity, creed, class, but also for any human being upon whom we happen. In Strabbing's circumstances, compliance with Jesus' command required him to care, not merely for the members of his unit, not only for his fellow Americans, but also for the most vulnerable human beings in

[12]. For an explication of this understanding of Jesus' love command, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, **Justice in Love**, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011). For related discussion, see Timothy Renick, "Charity Lost: The Secularization of the Principle of Double Effect in the Just War Tradition," **The Thomist** 58/3 (1994): 441-462.

the battle-space – those Fallujan non-combatants who remained in the city.[13] At the very least, to care for Fallujan non-combatants required Strabbing to accord their lives and well-being great weight in his deliberations as best to how to deploy his platoon's military assets: if a decision he makes risks killing or maiming a non-combatant, then that must count heavily against that decision. So Strabbing: "The moral reality is that there is no impunity on the battlefield. I was careful to emphasize to my Marines that we could expect innocent civilians to remain in the city. And we need to operate with that as a likely outcome for every house we entered and every round we fired."[14] Consequently, Strabbing resolved to adopt something like (4) as a tactical default, escalating the amount and kind of military violence employed from (4) to (3) to (2) or to (1) in accord with the level of perceived threat. Per Strabbing, "This is a key piece of the moral calculus. If I was confident that we were receiving hostile fire from a building, I would use all assets at my disposal to eliminate that threat without putting my Marines into excessive danger. If I was not certain, I would try to modulate the level of violence to the perceived threat level."[15]

Context is important for understanding the justificatory significance of Strabbing's religious convictions. As is familiar from over 18 years of conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan, many non-combatants are quite sympathetic to those committed to killing American soldiers and Marines. Even when they do not act in ways that render them liable to military violence, those non-combatants can act, or fail to act, in ways that naturally engender anger, resentment and hatred in response. I know of no better depiction of this moral reality than Jim Frederick's account of the entirely natural reaction of an ordinary soldier to being targeted by an Improvised Explosive Device (IED).

> And while you are sitting there, the anger builds as you review what just happened. Somebody, not far from this spot, someone right around here – it could be him, or him, or him – just tried to kill you. Who of these motherfuckers just tried to kill you? If you conduct a search and are a combination of lucky and good, you might find a guy or two who might have incriminating evidence on them. And then you can lay into them, have a momentary lick or two of revenge. But otherwise? Nothing. There is nothing you can do. There is no release from the anger and the adrenaline coursing through your veins. And look around. There's a man on his cell phone, a lady putting out some washing, a kid walking down the road, and you just cannot figure it. How can none of these people know anything about what just happened here? All of them said they have no idea. How could they not know? Of course they know. Somebody tried to kill you, he got away, and all of these people know something, yet they aren't saying anything. How could you not want to kill them, too, for protecting the person who just tried to kill you? How could you contain that rage?[16]

---

13. Care for the most vulnerable is a core biblical value. See Nicholas Wolterstorff, **Justice: Rights and Wrongs**, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 75ff.

14. Tim Strabbing, Personal Communication

15. Tim Strabbing, Personal Communication.

16. **Black Hearts: One Platoon's Descent Into Madness in Iraq's Triangle of Death**, (New York, NY: Broadway, 2010), p. 85. Frederick's description is replicated in the memoirs of many veterans of Iraq. So, for example, Donovan Campbell, a platoon leader who served in Ramadi, Iraq in 2004 eloquently, and I think insightfully, expresses the

Early on in his deployment Strabbing was gripped by just such emotions, particularly after witnessing the death of a fellow Marine from an IED – until a phone conversation with his wife revealed to him just how jaded he had become.

It is in this context that we can best appreciate the role played by Strabbing's faith. As a matter of brute psychological fact, human beings who are gripped by anger, resentment, or hatred often find it quite difficult to sacrifice their serious interests for those who have elicited their anger, resentment or hatred. Of course, this applies every bit as much to Marines in combat as it does to civilians at home. As a consequence, it is easy for Marines clearing houses in Fallujah to inhabit emotions that occlude their awareness of the moral standing of non-combatants, that impede them from according due normative weight to the lives and well-being of non-combatants, and that ease them into defaulting to aggressive tactical policies like (1) and (2). As I see it, one of the primary justificatory roles played by Strabbing's religious convictions was to insure that he continued to accord to Fallujan non-combatants a weighty role in his tactical deliberations – itself a difficult and significant moral achievement. That is, his religiously informed conception of the worth of all human beings in the battlespace precluded him adopting as a tactical default (1) or (2) or (3) and so led him to refuse to direct planes to bomb, artillery to shell, tanks to send shells, or Marines to

---

manner in which the silence and inaction of a local population altered the manner in which many ordinary soldiers perceived the members of that population. It's worth citing Campbell at length:

> Instead, despite our daily kindness, despite the relief projects, the money, the aid that we had already poured into the hospitals, despite the fact that we routinely altered our missions to make ourselves less safe in order to avoid offending them, the citizens of Ramadi had come out of their houses and actively tried to kill us. Multiple intelligence sources later told us that hundreds, if not thousands, of males ranging from teenagers to fifty-year-olds had grabbed their family's assault rifles and, using the chaos caused by the hardcore insurgents as cover, they had taken potshots at U.S. forces as we passed by. Maybe it was one of those bullets that tumbled through Gentile's face and neck or through the back of Langhorst's head, we thought.
>
> ...Making matters worse, the institutions that had formally agreed to assist us in our efforts ... not only abandoned their posts but also refused even to pass along the message that an attack was pending. ...[A]nyone could have done it – after all, on [the night before a mass uprising] the insurgents had posted flyers in the marketplace and elsewhere, flyers that warned businesses not to open and residents to stay at home on the following day as attacks on U.S. forces were planned. It would have taken only two or three people ... to warn us, but no one, to my knowledge, did.
>
> So on April 6, 2004, the 2nd battalion, 4th Marine Regiment flipped the switch of its default settings and settled firmly on kill. The insurgents, along with large swaths of the civilian population, had wanted a jihad, and a jihad we had given them. We had poured the full weight of our battalion's combat power into the city, and if the enemy decided to stand and fight again, we would do the exact same thing, only more quickly. And if the citizens who refused to help us, or even to warn us, suffered during the fighting that ensued, then so be it. We never believed that we could win without their support, but if they wanted to help the enemy put bullets through our stomachs, then they had to be prepared to live with the consequences. Maybe they had to fear us a little bit before they'd help us.

Joker One: A Marine Platoon's Story of Courage, Leadership, and Brotherhood, (New York. NY: Random House, 2009), pp. 188, 189. William Langewiesche describes a similar dynamic in his analysis of the killings that occurred in Haditha, Iraq. See "Rules of Engagement," **Vanity Fair**, November, 2006, accessible at http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2006/11/haditha200611.

lob grenades, into houses in order to 'neutralize' threats that might, or might not, lie within. Rather, he ordered his subordinates to 'dial up' the level of violence above (4) only given evidence of a commensurately increased level of threat.[17]

2.4 Disagreement With Comrades. Strabbing's cautious tactical policy was quite controversial. Some of his subordinates and some of his superiors believed that he should have pursued a more 'aggressive' default tactic – something akin to (2) or (3). Why? Surely instrumental considerations of various sorts played an important justificatory role: the Marines had been given a job to do, taking on greater risks would impede them from doing that job, and so they had excellent reason – reasons of 'military necessity.' But important moral considerations complemented the appeal to military necessity. The non-combatants who had remained in Fallujah, and who were caught between the Americans and the insurgents, were partly responsible for their precarious condition: they had been forewarned of the impending battle, they had been given ample opportunity to leave, yet they had refrained from doing so when they had the chance. Moreover, their responsibility significantly diminished the level of risk the American soldiers were required to accept in order to avoid harming them.[18] Strabbing's fellow Marines did not claim that, by refusing to leave the city when they had the opportunity, American combatants were permitted deliberately to target Fallujan citizens with lethal violence. (Even if they had, any claim in that vicinity is morally preposterous – not to mention inconsistent with widely held *jus in bello* constraints.) Rather, their position had to do with the level of risk that American soldiers were morally required to assume in order to avoid harming Fallujan non-combatants: the decision made by Fallujan non-combatants to remain in their city greatly reduced the level of risk American combatants were required to accept in order to avoid (unintentionally) harming them.[19] Of course, in the circumstances, reduced risk to American combatants inevitably translated into increased risk to non-combatants.

Given the increased level of risk that they were permitted to impose on Fallujan non-combatants,

---

[17]. Of note, in November 2005, less than a year after these events in Fallujah, elements of "K" Company, 3/1 suffered an IED attack in the Iraqi city of Haditha. Although not the focus of this paper, the aggressive application of lethal force in response to this attack by the squad, many of whom had fought in Fallujah, resulted in an NCIS investigation of 3/1 when it was discovered that 24 Iraqis had been killed, many of these women and children. Regardless of the outcome, the NCIS investigation clearly diminished the combat readiness of 3/1 while the members of the battalion focused on the ongoing investigation."

[18]. Versions of this moral claim have often been endorsed in the vast literature on the American experience in Afghanistan and Iraq. See, for example, Bill Ardolino, **Fallujah Awakens**, pp. 4-5; Patrick Bury, **Callsign Hades**, pp. 246ff.; Donovan Campbell, **Joker One**, pp. 186-192; Jim Frederick, **Black Hearts**, p. 85, 304.

[19]. One can easily imagine the corporal videotaped killing the wounded Iraqi adopting a similar rationale. If actually incapacitated, the Iraqi would have been a non-combatant and killing him would have been murderous. But the corporal couldn't under the circumstances be certain as to the wounded Iraqi's moral status – whether he was *in fact* incapacitated. Even so, the wounded Iraqi was responsible for the condition in which the corporal happened upon him. As a consequence, the corporal was morally permitted to 'distribute' the risks generated by the uncertainty of the Iraqi's condition to the Iraqi. Put colloquially, if you are responsible for seeming to pose a (wrongful) lethal threat to me, and if I can end that apparent threat only by killing you, then I may kill you even if it is inscrutable whether appearance is in this case reality. I should note that Strabbing is quite skeptical that the wounded Iraqi was responsible for his condition; this is something that neither Strabbing nor the corporal could know, since the Iraqi was wounded the day before he was killed and neither were present. Given that, it could be that the wounded Iraqi was an innocent civilian caught up in the crossfire.

American soldiers and Marines took themselves to be morally permitted to adopt something like (2) or (3) as a tactical default – firing tank shells into buildings from which they perceived no lethal threat and in which was ensconced, for all they knew, some indeterminate number of Iraqi non-combatants.[20] Recent Medal of Honor awardee David Bellavia nicely describes the practice. After narrowly escaping tragedy on a number of occasions, he reflects on the extreme danger involved in clearing houses meticulously laced with booby traps:

> We've got a serious tactical dilemma on our hands. If we are to treat each house as if its booby trapped, we'll go in cautiously. In house-clearing, confidence and quickness are absolutely vital. If we hesitate, if we methodically search for booby traps, we hand the initiative to any insurgents who may be in the house. We'll get lit the fuck up. Moving swiftly and decisively from room to room is the only way to surprise the enemy and minimize our exposure to their fire.[21]

But this is still extremely dangerous and Bellavia's squad eventually adopted a tactical policy for clearing houses that approaches (2):

> We find a rhythm. We're not supposed to clear every house and pull out every weapon or cache of supplies we find. That would take us days. This is a hunt. We look for bad guys and move on. Sergeant Jim and his Abrams tank prove vital to our speedy advance. He uses his main gun to blow holes in buildings, which we use as entry points. This is much safer than rolling the dice and kicking doors down. The 120mm gun is so powerful that it blows holes in three and sometimes four houses at once. The firepower of this svelte sixty-eight-ton monster allows us to move through each block on a fresh path, avoiding the tunnels and kill zones the insurgents have so meticulously laid out for us.[22]

Given the grave risk to which the soldiers and Marines involved in routing out Fallujan insurgents were vulnerable, it is certainly understandable why they might well be attracted to the much safer tactical policy which Bellavia here describes. Why send a soldier or a Marine when you can send a tank shell?

Here, I take it, is a dispute in which competing instrumental, moral and religious reasons reach into the innermost interstices of war. Several features of this dispute are worth noting. First, as platoon commander, Strabbing possessed the authority to decide which tactical policy his unit would follow: his platoon had been given a mission, it could achieve that mission by adhering to a spread of more or less restrained tactical policies, no legal norm, military regulation, or authoritative command mandated that his platoon adopt any one of those policies, and so, as platoon commander, Strabbing possessed the authority to determine which tactical policy his subordinates would be required to follow. Second, Strabbing decisively (though not exclusively) relied on his religious convictions to make that determination: but for his theological commitments, he would likely have adopted a different tactical policy. This is not a matter of

---

[20]. John C. McManus, **Grunts**, p. 397ff.
[21]. David Bellavia, **House to House**, p. 127.
[22]. David Bellavia, **House to House**, p. 132.

metaphysical necessity but of personal biography: although he could have settled on his cautious tactical policy on other grounds, Strabbing did in fact make that determination on the basis of theological commitments that happened to matter to him.[23] Third, Strabbing thereby 'imposed' his theological commitments on his subordinates: his religiously grounded decision to adopt a cautious tactical policy rendered that policy obligatory for his subordinates, such that any attempt on the part of a subordinate to follow a more aggressive policy could have had severe repercussions. On at least one intuitive sense of 'imposition,' this is a clear case of a religious imposition. Fourth, this kind of imposition is at the very heart of what it means to be an officer in a modern military: officers have no option but to make life and death decisions on the basis of their best assessment of relevant considerations and their subordinates are thereby required to comply. That is, anyone who inhabits the social role of officer in a modern military has no option but to impose his or her best moral and prudential judgments on subordinates. Of course, this is true not only of Strabbing but also of those who repudiated his religious convictions: those who adopted a more aggressive tactical policy than that favoured by Strabbing imposed their moral, prudential and perhaps religious judgments on their subordinates no less, and no more, than did Strabbing.

3.0 Further Aspects of Faith at War. I have tried to provide a properly nuanced specification of the role played by Strabbing's religiously informed conception of the value of human life in his tactical deliberations, one that led him to accord great normative weight to the lives of Fallujan non-combatants in circumstances in which it is quite natural not to do so. So the primary role of his religious convictions was to extend the sphere of moral concern beyond the narrow confines of his fellow American combatants. Before I turn to the larger, more theoretical issues raised by the preceding discussion, let me identify three further respects in which Strabbing's faith shaped the manner in which he exercised his command authority. These include the manner in which Strabbing's adherence to Jesus love command shaped his understanding of the moral injuries from which his platoon members needed protection, his understanding of the duties he bore towards enemy combatants, and the emotions through which he perceived Fallujan combatants and non-combatants.

3.1 Moral Injury. As I noted above, any platoon commander in Strabbing's circumstances had to give due normative weight to a number of considerations, among the most important of which had to do with the well-being of his subordinates. He was duty bound to bring his men out alive, consistent with the demands of law, morality, and military regulation. It's obvious from the memoires of combatants throughout the history of war that this is a most deeply felt duty. David

---

[23]. As Tom Robertson has explained to me, authenticity is widely regarded as a critically important trait of military leaders: they do what they believe to be morally correct even at the risk of their career. General Al Gray, a retired USMC General widely revered amongst Marines, explained, "Care first about what you are — your values, beliefs, and actions. Then you will care about how you look (and for the right reasons). Others follow you for what you are, because they believe in you and what you do. You look in a mirror to see how you look. You look in the faces others to know what you are." P. Otte, Grayisms, (Potomac Institute Press. Arlington, Virginia, 2015) p. 24 as cited in Frank Anderson, **Leadership Exemplified: An Old Man's Approach to Authentic Leadership**, 2016, accessible at https://sites.psu.edu/leaderfoundationsclarke/2016/06/06/leadership-exemplified-an-old-mans-authentic-approach-to-leadership/. So understood, Strabbing's decision to adopt a cautious tactical policy exhibited just the kind of authenticity desired of Marine officers..

Bellavia conveys its urgency:

> I am a Christian, but my time in Iraq has convinced me that God does not want to hear from me anymore. I have done things that even He can never forgive. I've done them consciously; I've made decisions I must live with for years to come. I am not a victim. In each instance, I heard my conscience call for restraint. I told it to shut the fuck up and let me handle my business. All the sins I've committed, I've done with one objective: to keep my men alive. …The need to keep my men alive makes everything else negotiable, and everyone and everything a potential threat.[24]

As we saw above, Bellavia took this duty to license his adoption of a tactical policy akin to (2): he fulfilled his duty 'to keep his men alive' by firing tank shells into buildings, thereby eliminating potential threats to their physical survival. But the past twenty years or so of counter-insurgency operations reveals the complexity of that duty to care – that it extends far beyond insuring that subordinates survive combat. How so?

There is now a vast literature on the problem of 'moral injury' – a literature the growth of which tracks very troubling trends in suicide rates among veterans who return whole in body but broken or damaged in spirit.[25] Combatants sometimes perform acts that violate their deeply held moral convictions. Such violative acts can engender debilitating depression, feelings of worthlessness, alienation from loved ones, and the like. They can have life-altering, and life-ending, results.[26] Given the grave consequences of moral injury, it has become ever clearer that military superiors must be most solicitous not only of the physical but also of the moral and spiritual well-being of their subordinates. This was a very important factor in Strabbing's tactical deliberations:

> Part of the scourge of warfare is that no one emerges without moral injury. The question is how deep is the wound or trauma going to be? And can you lead in such a way that you protect your Marines from the worst of it or at least try to create a framework for honorable behavior in an incredibly morally compromised situation. Morality in combat is like running through a pile of manure--you are going to get manure on you, but you don't have to dive into it. One of my goals as a Platoon Commander was that everyone in my platoon, myself included, could look ourselves in the mirror when we got home and know that we made decisions that were the best we could make given the circumstances, and that we did all that we could to act in a moral and honorable way on the battlefield. That we would do all we could to keep our humanity intact in the midst of incredible evil and violence.[27]

---

[24]. David Bellavia, **House to House**, p. 44.

[25]. Marc LiVecche, **The Good Kill: Moral Injury and Just War**, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming); Robert Emmett Meagher and Douglas A. Pryor, eds., **War and Moral Injury: A Reader**, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018; Jonathan Shay, **Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character**, (New York, NY: Scribner, 1994); Jonathan Shay, "Moral Injury," *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 31/2 (2014): 182-191; David Wood, **What Have We Done: The Moral Injury of Our Longest Wars**, (New York, NY: Little, Brown and Co., 2016).

[26]. Although I cannot draw any direct connection … no-one alive now can … it is perhaps worth mentioning that the team leader of the scout sniper who was involved in the Mosque shooting video-taped by Sites later committed suicide.

[27]. Tim Strabbing, Personal Communication.

Although a platoon commander has a duty to preserve and promote the moral and spiritual well-being of his or her subordinates, there is no way to do so in a morally and religiously 'neutral' way: if Strabbing is to do what he morally can to prevent moral injury to his subordinates, he will have to rely on some conception of the wrong-doing that engenders moral injury, and for this it's hard to see any alternative than that he relies on his own moral and religious self-understanding. This is an important way in which Strabbing's religious convictions shaped his command decisions: he believed that Fallujan non-combatants enjoyed a weighty moral status that many of his peers discounted, he therefore adopted a tactical policy that precluded his subordinates from committing grave wrongs against those Fallujan non-combatants, and in so doing he hoped to prevent his subordinates from committing violative acts that might eventually lead to grave moral injury to them. In short, Strabbing's religiously informed commitment to the worth of all human beings in the battlespace led him to conclude that the aggressive tactical policies favoured by many of his subordinates and superiors were gravely wrong, that compliance with those policies could morally injure his American compatriots, and so he was compelled to adopt a cautious tactical policy to which his compatriots were most allergic.[28]

3.2 Love of Insurgents. I have so far focussed on the manner in which Strabbing's adherence to Jesus' love command precluded him from narrowing the scope of his moral concerns in such way as to diminish the relevance of Iraqi non-combatants in his overall tactical deliberations. But Strabbing's faith commitments had an even more radical implication. How so? We might well wonder whether Strabbing thought that Jesus' love command applied to the insurgents against whom he fought. It turns out that he did: "Jesus taught that we must love our enemies. That passage from the Sermon on the Mount carried great weight for me in Iraq (and still today). This is something I thought a great deal about before and during my deployments, especially in Fallujah. It means recognizing that our enemies have worth and value, even if they intend to do harm. For me, one way to love our enemies is to provide an opportunity for surrender, should they choose not to fight. This was why I prayed that they would surrender and not fight. Their not fighting was not only safer for them – it was much safer for my Marines (and me!) as well."[29] Here is what I take to be Strabbing's rationale: 'Love of enemies requires me to take feasible measures to allow enemy insurgents to surrender, adopting a tactical policy like (4) provided insurgents with that opportunity and still enabled my Marines to achieve their mission, and so love of neighbor required me to adopt a cautious tactical policy like (4).' So Strabbing's religiously informed conscience led him to extend the scope of his moral concern both to Iraqi non-combatants and to

---

[28]. There is a further, closely related respect in which Strabbing's faith influenced his understanding of his duty to protect his subordinates from moral injury. Although it is hard to imagine a military officer who doesn't care at all about protecting his or her subordinates from moral injury, it seems clear that reasonable and competent officers can disagree about the importance of doing so. It seems that, for Strabbing, his duty to prevent or diminish moral injury, his duty to "create a framework for honorable conduct in an incredibly morally compromised situation," was a very high priority – far higher for him than it seems to have been for Bellavia. So far as I can tell – and it is hard to tell! – Bellavia seems to have privileged "bringing his men home alive" over doing "all that we could do to act in a moral and honorable way on the battlefield." Not so Strabbing. No doubt Strabbing's faith had much to do with his order of priorities: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16:25-26, NIV)

[29]. Tim Strabbing, Personal Communication.

Iraqi combatants thus providing two distinct but reinforcing reasons to exercise due caution when clearing houses in Fallujah. Otherwise put, Strabbing had multiple distinct and individually sufficient religious reasons to adopt a cautious tactical default like (4).

As it turns out, Strabbing's cautious tactical default seems to have had concrete results. According to Strabbing, his unit became known as "the PUC-Platoon." "PUC" is an acronym denoting a "Person Under Control"; a combatant who has surrendered. Apparently, Strabbing's platoon garnered a disproportionately high number of PUCs, a statistic that seems to have resulted from his adoption of a cautious default tactical policy. Presumably, the more cautious the deployment of violence, the greater the opportunity to surrender and so the greater the number of PUCs.[30] For Strabbing, this statistical reality was a manifestation of his compliance with Jesus' command to love his enemies and an answer to prayers that Strabbing addressed to God both before and throughout the battle of Fallujah. It was also a source of much of the contentiousness between Strabbing and his compatriots: "My Marines chafed at my approach, and frankly, I felt like I was constantly pulling back on the reigns to try to slow and quell their aggression. And the rest of the company took notice, especially around surrendered combatants. We got the nickname 'PUC Platoon' for how many POWs we took during Fallujah. Underneath the criticism is the thought that we should have killed them, not taken them prisoner."[31]

3.3 Moral Emotion. War elicits some of the most powerful emotions that human beings are capable of experiencing: fury over the death of a beloved comrade, a desire to retribute the perfidious execution of a fellow soldier, deep love for those who have fought and suffered together. Given the incredibly difficult circumstances in which soldiers in combat find themselves, it is easy for the negative emotions that are so naturally experienced therein to lead to moral atrocity. But, of course, emotions are not merely states that happen to us; we have the ability to shape and manage them. Pluasibly, those engaged in combat have a powerful duty to form and manage their emotions in ways that help them to avoid moral atrocity. It's important to note, however, that the formation and discipline of emotion is not only a responsibility of individual combatants. It is also the responsibility of military superiors: officers and senior enlisted ought to do what they can to foster attitudes and emotions in their subordinates that enable their subordinates to accomplish the mission while avoiding moral atrocity. So the duty to form and discipline emotion is one that should be shared by individual and military hierarchy.

This is a main lesson from one of the best books on the American experience in Iraq, Jim Fredericks' **Black Hearts**. His narrative follows the tragic 'descent into madness' of one Army platoon – a descent that terminated in the gang-rape of a 14 year old, the murder of her family by four soldiers, the cover-up of those atrocities by a number of their platoon members, and the exposure of the whole sordid affair by a very junior enlisted soldier. His account is at the same

---

[30]. Tom Robertson has offered the following context: "Tactically, the PUCs created a logistical issue as Strabbing was required to coordinate transfer of the PUCs to other Company personnel. Alternately, the PUCs at least offered the potential for valuable battlefield intelligence. Additionally, in a "long war", the narrative of U. S. Marines having the restraint to allow enemy fighters to surrender rather than killing them had the potential to contribute to a successful resolution of the overall conflict."

[31]. Tim Strabbing, Personal Communication.

time fascinating, depressing, sobering and yet also hopeful: many in the Triangle of Death were buffeted by emotions of betrayal, isolation, hatred, and rage, but some were able to discipline those emotions in ways that averted tragedy. One platoon fails, two similarly situated platoons do not, and the reader is forced to reflect on what accounts for the difference. It is clear from his narrative that emotional discipline was a first priority for senior enlisted in the two platoons that did not descend into the kind of 'madness' that afflicted the other. "Getting his guys not to give in to hate no matter how frustrated they were, or how badly their friends got hurt, was by far his biggest challenge. 'Soldiers can turn negative in a heartbeat,' [one senior enlisted] remarked. 'Fuck this! Fuck these people!' People would get mad when they were not telling us information. ...[He] considered managing the attitudes and morals of his men to be the biggest part of his job. Anytime he heard complaints about the Iraqis ... he snuffed it out quick. 'You need to shut the fuck up and focus.'" The moral of Roberts' tragic story is clear: managing moral emotions is a moral and military imperative and that imperative is a primary responsibility of those, like Strabbing, who exercise command authority in war.

Religious traditions provide military officers with resources that can greatly help them to fulfill that imperative. I take as given that, in order for a military superior to manage the moral emotions of his subordinates, he must manage and discipline his own emotions: a hate-filled officer is unlikely to prevent equally hate-filled subordinates from going off the rails. Strabbing's faith helped him to discipline his emotions in at least two respects. First, as I noted above, Strabbing took himself to have a strict duty to love each human being in the battlespace, whether combatant or non-combatant. Insofar as fulfilling this duty mattered to him, as it clearly did, then he enjoyed powerful resources to resist being overtaken by negative emotions like hatred, anger, and a desire for revenge. After all, it is exceptionally difficult genuinely to love another human being and to hate them as well! Second, Strabbing's faith provided him with various practices that helped him manage his emotions. So, for example, crucial to any robust adherence to the Christian faith is the practice of prayer, whereby one implores God to help one fulfil one's duties, to protect loved ones from harm, and the like. In Strabbing's case, this practice of prayer was directed at Fallujan combatants and non-combatants: both before and during his experience in Fallujah, Strabbing implored God to protect Fallujan non-combatants and to motivate insurgents to surrender. By his own accounting, this practice of prayer greatly helped to moderate the powerfully negative emotions he had begun to feel towards Iraqi combatants and non-combatants early on in his deployment: it is exceptionally difficult to genuinely to pray for the well-being of others and at the same time to hate them as well!

One final point. I suspect that the disagreement between Strabbing and his platoon over the proper tactical default is largely explained by their differing emotional, and thus perceptual, states. Moral deliberation is often powerfully, and rationally, shaped by the moral emotions that shape our moral perceptions and it is plausible to suppose that Strabbing 'saw the world differently' than did his dissenting compatriots. Christians like Strabbing believe that Jesus' love command must be understood not only in the context of the Parable of the Good Samaritan but also of the Prodigal Son. The latter is plausibly understood as requiring its hearers to have compassion for sufferers irrespective of the moral guilt or responsibility of those who undergo suffering: we are to love each and every human being upon whom we happen and one central way to manifest that

love is to have compassion even for those who are responsible for their plight. Of course, that Christian understanding is quite controversial; many believe that we may feel compassion only for those who are not responsible for the unfortunate condition – those who suffer undeserved harm. If we accept Robert Roberts' conception of what makes for an emotion – as a concerned-based construal that shapes our perception of our circumstances – then perhaps the disagreement between Strabbing and his fellow unit members was in significant part a function of competing construals of the Fallujan non-combatants who decided to remain in their city – competing construals that reflect disagreements about the proper relation between compassion and moral responsibility.[32] Similarly for their differing perceptions of Fallujan insurgents: perceiving Fallujan insurgents in light of his duty to love, and so to have compassion for, any and all human beings, Strabbing was able to control the hostile emotions that so gripped his platoon members – the hatred and desire for revenge that is so often elicited by the killing of friends and unit members by enemy combatants.

4.0 Religion and War. My intent in this short reflection is not to adjudicate the dispute between Strabbing and his fellow Marines, much less to address in a systematic manner the contentious claims about command responsibility, love of neighbor, and due care raised by Strabbing's religiously grounded resolution. Rather, I want to provide one clear case in which the religious directs the use of military violence in war in a respect that seems to run athwart a separationist sensibility about religion and war that enjoys considerable popularity in Western liberal polities. It isn't easy to delineate that separationist sensibility with specificity – it's as much a mood to be inhabited as a conception amenable to theoretical articulation. In lieu of a much more detailed treatment, let me lay that separationist account out in very broad terms.

4.1 The Separation of Religion and War. The overwhelming consensus in Western liberal polities is that mixing religion and war leads to brutality, soldiers driven by religious passion fight without proportion or discrimination, communities that wage war for religious reasons demonize the enemy. Everyone knows that the Crusades were unmitigated moral disasters, that religious wars are moral horrors, that western liberal democracies emerged out of an allergic reaction to the confessional wars of the 16th and 17th centuries, and that it is morally obscene for human beings to kill one another in the name of God. The intensity of emotion evoked by religious justifications for violence is well expressed by Philip Jenkins, a scholar whose work on religion I find to be most compelling. In an otherwise sober, academic treatment of various Old Testament passages that seem to endorse genocidal war, Jenkins tells his audience: "There's probably a nice way to say this … I suppose that I don't have to. Only idiots would take the Bible as justifying violence."[33] Culturally prevalent platitudes of this sort sustain a widely shared and deeply felt sense that we must expunge the religious from the martial. And if we must purge the martial of any manifestation of religion, what remains? Overwhelmingly, the answer involves some appeal to 'the secular.' Secular Reason must govern, discipline and control the use of military violence in war.

---

[32]. I have been greatly helped in reflecting on these matters by Robert Roberts' "Virtues and Belief in God," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 15/5 (2017): 480-88.

[33]. "Laying Down the Sword: Coming to Terms with Violent Scriptures," lecture given at Baylor University, 2/8/2012, accessible at http://www.isreligion.org/tv/lectures.php. See James Turner Johnson, **The Holy War Idea in Western and Islamic Traditions**, (State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), p. 12.

For only when the martial is disciplined by the secular can we prevent the conflict that pervades ordinary human interaction from escalating into a brutal and brutalizing war between Good and Evil, Heaven and Hell, Light and Darkness.

This separationist sensibility in turn drives sweeping claims about the proper location of religion in modern society: over and over again, the horrors induced by the use of religious reasons to rationalize military violence are employed by theorists to legitimate the claim that religion should be relegated to the private life of individuals and so ought not decisively shape the manner in which we settle our common affairs.[34] If they are correct, public life – the business of politics as with the practice of war – welcomes only those willing to satisfy their official duties and political responsibilities as determined by the dictates of Secular Reason. Timothy Challans nicely captures this separationist conception of the relation between God and war, religion and the military, faith and politics:

> The military remains an institution that strongly relies on doctrine and authority. Both must be justifiable through reason … not by faith. The military and related political institutions should remove all religious influence from its moral and political concerns. We should not [choose] our wars based on apocalyptic prophesies from a millennial mindset or [go] to war because the commander-in-chief gets orders from above and beyond to attack a country. War is too serious a matter to be left to the mystagogueries of faith. Matters of right and wrong, good and bad, should … be based on [reasons] that everyone can assent to, which means such matters cannot depend on moral articles of faith.[35]

Challans here articulates a widely prevailing sense in Western liberal polities that we should abide by a strict separation between religion and war – one that requires us to 'remove all religious influence' from the military, from war, and from the political at the very least insofar as it bears on war. And this prevailing sensibility is often employed as a dialectical weapon, or a rhetorical strategy, to insure that religion also keeps to its properly private place in liberal polities.

4.2 Secular Conceptions of Just War. I am quite interested in assessing popular separationist commonplaces of the sort enunciated by Challans. I am equally interested in evaluating the dialectical and rhetorical uses to which they are put. But, in this short reflection, I have a narrower focus: the influence of separationist sensibilities on conceptions of the morality of war. Let there be no doubt: many contemporary adherents formulate the Just War Tradition (JWT) so that it accords nicely with the separationist mood about religion and war that pervades the shared culture of Western liberal polities. Perhaps in order to compensate for its religious prehistory, many insist that the JWT has outgrown its religious provenance and so ought to be understood

---

[34]. "The entire tradition of modern liberal thought remains Hobbesian in its insistence that 'mixing' religion and politics, church and state, is an awful idea and an even worse practice to be avoided at all costs, the Reformation era's violence being the principle body of evidence, augmented in recent years by allegations of Islam's failure to see the light." Brad Gregory, **The Unintended Reformation: How A Religious Revolution Secularized Society**, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2013), p. 162. For extended discussion of the 'separation of church and state' and its complex relation with the 'separation of religion and war,' see James Turner Johnson, **The Holy War Idea**, pp. 1-27.

[35]. Timothy Challans, **The Awakening Warrior: Revolution in the Ethics of Warfare**, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 70.

absent any association with God, the religious, or the sacred. As a consequence, many of its adherents construe the JWT in resolutely secular terms. As I understand it, an often inchoately formed separationist sensibility elides into a secularized conception of the JWT – and the morality of war more generally.

James Turner Johnson has, in a number of monographs, traced a centuries-long narrative that depicts a rather thorough-going and pervasive secularization of the JWT. As Johnson tells the story, early modern advocates of the JWT were horrified by the carnage engendered by the wars of religion between Catholics and Protestants following the Reformation and undertook prevent them by insisting that the use of military violence in war be justified by "natural reason" and so by appeal to reasons that "all men could be expected to possess."[36] Eventually, the requirement that *natural* reason discipline the use of military violence in war transmuted into the requirement that military violence must be governed by *secular* reason, such that both the "resort to war" as well as the "practices allowable in war" must be justified in "secular terms that are intended to be universal in scope."[37] This overtly secularized conception of the JWT has been extremely influential and now deeply shapes contemporary conceptions of what makes for a just war. So Johnson: "as it has taken shape in Western culture in the modern era," the JWT "explicitly seeks to rule out transcendent points of reference" and therefore "leaves no room for arguments, claims or behavior based in sectarian belief structures."[38]

Given Johnson's historical reconstruction, we should be the reverse of surprised to find a contemporary advocate of the JWT, Brian Orend, assuring his readers that the JWT is "a secular concept … a way of thinking about war's rightness or wrongness without appealing to God or scripture,"[39] such that any morally justified war must be fully supported by "a sober, non-religious argument – accessible to any reasonable person – which draws on real evidence…."[40] With admirable clarity, David Little articulates an important element of this "secularized just war doctrine":

> Only those reasons for using force are acceptable that appeal to what human beings hold in common 'by nature,' rather than to what distinguishes or differentiates them from one another. Not all human beings hold the same religious beliefs, nor possess the same amount of wealth or property, nor have the same education…. It is therefore utterly inappropriate to invoke as a reason for using force against another any of these considerations. By contrast, all human beings commonly experience the pain and distress of arbitrary confinement, of severe suffering, or of being deprived of property, sustenance, limb, or life. Therefore, force may be justified, and may only be justified, 'by nature'…."[41]

---

[36]. **Ideology, Reason, and the Limitation of War: Religious and Secular Concepts 1200-1740**, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 260.
[37]. **The Holy War Idea**, p, 174fn 3.
[38]. **The Holy War Idea**, pp. 14-15; see also 31, 47, 59, 133, 174fn 3.
[39]. **The Morality of War**, (Broadview Press, 2006), p. 10.
[40]. **The Morality of War**, p. 73.
[41]. "Holy War Appeals and Western Christianity," **Just War and Jihad**, John Kelsay and James Turner Johnson, eds., (Greenwood Press, 1991), p. 133.

Little here focuses on a very particular, and very important, component of a secularized conception – the idea that religious reasons ought not be invoked as a justification for the use of military force. But there are many broader statements as well – those that parlay the prohibition on invoking religious reasons as a basis for using military violence into far more encompassing proscriptions. Consider in this regard a representative and easily replicated statement by Charles Kimball:

> Perilous situations, at times, may indeed warrant the decisive use of force or focused military action. But such action must not be cloaked in religious language or justified by religion. ...While there are legitimate bases for collective military action in the community of nations, an appeal to religion is not one of them. Moreover, in a world with a growing number of sinister weapons of mass destruction, declaring and prosecuting a holy war is not only a corruption of religion; it is also potentially suicidal. ... This much is clear: holy war is not holy. However deep the grievances and perceived injustices may be, holy war is not the answer. Whatever religious justifications Christians or Muslims put forward in the past, the results of 'holy' warfare were consistently catastrophic. To pursue holy war is to rush headlong down a dead-end street.[42]

Kimball here advocates in favor of a vague but apparently quite expansive conception of the proper separation between religion and war. He frames that conception by employing the fraught concept of a 'holy war.' Two features of his discussion are particularly striking.

First, although it's not clear exactly what Kimball means by a holy war, his condemnation seems to indicate that he operates with quite an expansive conception. If he is correct, we must refrain not only from 'justifying' war by appeal to religion but also from talking about war in religious terms – 'cloaking' war with religious language. If we take this condemnation seriously, Kendall would presumably find fault with a war fully justified by the 'natural' or 'secular' reasons required by Little, but about which its participants speak in religious terms. This expansive conception of what makes for a holy war would seem to provide the predicate for finding fault with pretty much any war in human history – even the Allied war against Nazism, characterized by the Swiss theologian Karl Barth in a number of public letters to his co-religionists in Czechoslovakia, France, Great Britain, and the United States as a war commanded by God to defend the "Christian cause" against the nihilistic Hitler and his henchmen.[43] Second, Kimball affirms this expansive conception with apocalyptic urgency: he seems to believe that anything that falls under his broad conception of holy war is, as such, corrupting, catastrophic, potentially suicidal. Apparently, Kimball believes that only by abiding by a rather strict 'separation of religion and war' can we avoid the most dire of fates. As I noted above, a separationist sensibility about religion and war is as much pervasive mood as theory affirmed... and here we see that the mood involved can be urgent indeed.

---

[42]. Charles Kimball, **When Religion Becomes Evil**, (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), p. 168-69, 196

[43]. "It is the clear will of God that we should recognize the true nature and power of [Hitler's] movement, in order to combat it with all our strength. The obedience of the Christian to the clear will of God compels him to support this war." Karl Barth, **This Christian Cause: A Letter to Great Britain from Switzerland**, (New York, NY: MacMillans Publishers, 1941), no pagination.

4.3 Skepticism About Separationist and Secularized Conceptions of War. It would be easy to reproduce many statements expressing the kind of separationist-cum-secularized conception of the morality of war affirmed by Orend, Challans, Little and Kimball. And so I take it to be beyond dispute that many contemporary advocates of the JWT affirm a very wide separation of God and war, religion and the military, the theological and the martial. I reject such separationist conceptions. Although I affirm the JWT as the best available conception of the morality of war, I doubt that we should construe the JWT in anything like the thoroughgoing separationist or secularized way affirmed by so many contemporary theorists.

This is not because I deny that the incursion of God into war can engender moral horror. Of course it can, and it has – many times. But separationist formulations of the sort that I have briefly canvassed do not accord due weight to the various and complex ways in which religion can justify and constrain military violence. Religion is complex, multifaceted, normatively ambiguous; war is the same. We should not expect there to be any simple, clear principle that demarcates the normative boundaries between the two. So, for example, I see precious little reason to subscribe to a blanket ban on 'cloaking' religion in religious language – if by that we mean a ban on construing military conflict with religious concepts, speaking of war in religious terms, or the like. And there is certainly no good reason to 'remove all religious influence' from the military, from war, or from politics insofar as it impinges on war. Much to the contrary, the most defensible position to take on this matter is also quite banal: in certain respects, the religious may influence the martial and in others it may not. Given that broad and boring truth, the goal should be to demarcate acceptable modes of integration in as precise, nuanced, and plausible a manner as is possible given the unavoidable complexity of the subject matter.

I cannot here defend this claim. I only want to cast a bit of doubt on the separationist sensibility that seems so often to lead to secularized conceptions of the morality of war. And I want to do so by returning to Strabbing's experience in Fallujah. I take it to indicate – not demonstrate! – that we need a far more nuanced understanding of the relation between religion and war than the separationist conceptions that seem so deeply embedded in the culture of Western liberal polities. (It's hard to tell, since the separationist sensibility normally seems inchoately felt rather than explicitly articulated.) For in Strabbing's case, I take it, 'Secular Reason' – in the guise of 'military necessity' and 'personal responsibility' – counselled aggression yet was constrained by 'the religious' – in the form of a self-sacrificial love of neighbor enjoined upon humanity by God. In his case, so far as I can tell, religious commitment diminished violence, protected the vulnerable, attenuated aggression, and might well have safeguarded the moral well-being of his subordinate Marines. Moreover, Strabbing's religious commitments were effective precisely because deeply felt: far from religious 'fanaticism' leading to moral atrocity, determined piety led in Strabbing's case to a sincere attempt to control the considerable violence at his disposal. Indeed, it is reasonable to assume that anything less than deeply formed religious commitment would have melted away under the intense pressure to which Strabbing was subjected. This last point bears emphasis.

Consider how difficult it must have been for a young man who had only recently graduated from the Naval Academy, and who had no prior combat experience, to rebuff both his senior enlisted and company commander, who implored him to achieve the mission more aggressively, even while

the members of his platoon, with whom he was deeply bonded, realized that his caution exposed them to considerable physical risk from an enemy willing to go to any lengths to kill the lot of them. Indeed, Strabbing's 'deliberate,' less than fully aggressive, policy risked harm not only to the members of his platoon, but also to the members of other units as well: Strabbing's caution gave insurgents better prospect of disengaging, escaping, and 'leaking out' to other locations in the battlespace, thereby resulting in potentially grave harm to Marines in other units.[44] And this to protect 'anonymous' human beings with whom no American soldier or Marine had any meaningful personal connection. Given the circumstances, the pressure to be more aggressive was entirely understandable.

Surely it would have been an easy thing for Strabbing to have decided – or to have convinced himself – to adopt a practice that religious believers have long employed to extricate themselves from morally and politically dissonant circumstances, viz., to relegate their deepest religious convictions to some inner, private sphere, never to be imposed on others, and so never to shape their public comportment.[45] How natural would it have been for Strabbing to allow his 'personal' religious convictions to idle as he adhered to the not inconsiderable secular reasons that counted in favor of a more aggressive tactical policy. Plausibly, but for his refusal to do so, but for his determined commitment to respect the worth of each of his American and Iraqi 'neighbors' in the face of considerable pressure from more experienced superiors and subordinates, certain ordinary, nameless (to us) human beings might not have survived the American assault on Fallujah. Plausibly as well, it might well have prevented grave moral and spiritual harm to the members of his own unit. Here, then, is one case in which transgression of the separationist's *cordon sanitaire* between the religious and the martial led not to moral atrocity but to controlled violence.[46] For my

---

[44]. Tom Robertson: "Alternately, it is conceivable that demoralized insurgents, learning of the possibility of surrender over death, could have disengaged from other platoon's areas of responsibility to move towards Strabbing's platoon in order to avoid certain death. This may account for the large numbers of PUCs that Strabbing's platoon removed from the battlefield."

[45]. Of course, many theorists are perfectly at peace with religious privatization; they see in 'public religion' an aspiration to theocracy, a threat to liberty, the onset of fascism, among many other horribles. So, for example, Richard Rorty once argued that religious liberty was possible only by privatizing religion – "making it seem in bad taste to being religion into discussions of public policy." ("Religion as a Conversation-Stopper," **Philosophy and Social Hope**, [New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1999], p. 169. But privatizing religion can threaten liberty just as readily as it can threaten it – as is amply demonstrated by the history of my own Protestant faith: some Southern and then Confederate Protestants blunted what they otherwise took to be the clear implications of their own faith commitments for the morality of slavery by retreating into a 'spiritual gospel' that was stripped of any and all political implications; some German Protestants avoided a potentially lethal clash with Nazism by adopting the functional equivalent of religious privatization, viz., a rigid version of Luther's Two Kingdoms doctrine; some Pentecostals in South America have become functional allies of autocratic regimes by their blinkered focus on personal regeneration; and on and on. This is an important theme in Alec Ryrie's **Protestants: The Faith That Made The Modern World**, (New York, NY: Viking Books, 2017). Indeed, I think that religious privatization is one of the besetting sins of the Christian faith – one that both Christians and non-Christians have excellent reason to suspect. Particularly trenchant is the case against religious privatization articulated by the agnostic and professedly secular C. Wright Mills in his "A Pagan Sermon to the Christian Clergy," **The Politics of Truth: Selected Writings of C. Wright Mills**, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 163-172.

[46]. Further context from Tom Robertson: "Strabbing brought all of his Marines out of this battle alive. He also asserts that his platoon never failed to 'keep up' or 'hold the line of advance.' This is significant, because other than the 'leaking out' mentioned earlier, one other major criticism of Strabbing's tactical decisions is, erroneously, that his more cautious approach caused tactical delays."

part, Strabbing strikes me as quite an exemplary human being, his piety admirable, and his determined commitment to follow his religiously informed conscience worthy of emulation. In his case, I think, the integration of God into the practice of war was far preferable to the separation of God from war.

5.0 Conclusion. Of course, Strabbing's story might be highly idiosyncratic. Perhaps he is an outlier. It is possible that, in the vast majority of cases in which religion shapes military violence, the violence explodes, prolongs, demeans, escalates out of control. Perhaps, at the end of the day, it will be apparent that the conventional separationist wisdom is correct – that mixing religion and war really does render war more brutal and indiscriminate than it would otherwise be. But then that is a claim worth exploring, not something one can settle by *a priori* reflection.[47] After all, it is logically possible that soldiers who are guided solely by secular reasons – those for whom the secular is cut free from any religious moorings – are more likely than they would otherwise be to act as did the Marine corporal whose shooting of the wounded Iraqi Strabbing took be the unjustified killing of a helpless human being. Again, it might be the case that there are many combatants – unremarked in the press, overlooked by historians, uncalculated by sociologists – who take themselves to have a duty to honor God in their every action and inaction, and who, as a consequence, deploy the destructive power at their disposal in a far more cautious and careful manner than they would were they to attend only to the secular reasons that matter to them. And, of course, this might be true not merely of a Marine lieutenant engaged in small-unit combat, but also citizens and statesmen as they play their respective roles in assessing, supporting, and opposing the wars in which their polities are implicated.

It is at least worth exploring the possibility that we should be every bit as wary of military violence governed by the secular as we are of military violence governed by the religious. If we should be every bit as sceptical of the secular as we are of the religious, then it also seems worth exploring the possibility that religious reasons may work cooperatively with secular reasons both to justify and to constrain the use of military violence. And if religious reasons may work cooperatively with secular

---

[47]. This would require an extensive examination of historical and biographical sources. This is a massive undertaking. How it would turn out, I do not know. Interestingly, Tim Collins relates a tactical decision that raises issues similar to Strabbing's adoption of a cautious default tactical policy. During the 2003 Invasion of Iraq, the tank battalion he commanded confronted the Iraqi Army's 25th Brigade. Collins suspected that they would not fight given an overwhelming show of force, wanted to offer them the opportunity to surrender, and so arranged for a parley. As with Strabbing's adoption of a cautious tactical policy, this decision posed significant risk for Collins. Here is Collins:

> My calculation was that, faced with the fear of our overwhelming force, the Iraqis would grasp any chance to avoid certain destruction. I wanted them to know that they fateful hour was looming; there would be no surprise for them. I would, however, be risking the lives of British servicemen in order to avoid spilling Iraqi blood. This was all on my head. Should I just blast my way forward? Who were these people, the Iraqis, to me anyway? But my heart told me that all would be well and that my duty was to avoid killing – at all costs. I would follow that still, small voice of calm.

Tim Collins, **Rules of Engagement: A Life in Conflict**, (London: Headline Book Publishing, 2005), p. 286. Was Collins' tactical decision at all influenced by his faith? I don't know. He is silent about that, despite the fact that he employs suggestive religious imagery: the "still, small voice" to which he refers is surely a reference to God's communication to the Prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 19: 12.

reasons to justify and constrain the use of military violence, then there is excellent reason to articulate a far more nuanced, integrated understanding of the proper role of religion in war than the separationist sensibility seems to allow. Instead of trying to expunge God from war, we should integrate our best understanding of the morality of war with an appreciation for the role that religious conviction can play in helping us to do justice in war.[48]

[48]. I realize that I have left a whole host of issues unaddressed. So, for example, as David Luban has pressed, it might be the case that we should 'separate' religion and war with respect to *ad bellum* issues but 'integrate' them with respect to *in bello* issues. I am skeptical of that view, but cannot explain why in this paper. For further discussion, see Christopher J. Eberle, "God and War: Some Exploratory Questions," *Journal of Law and Religion*, *28/1* (2012-2013): 1-46; "God, War and Conscience," *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 35/3 (September, 2007): 479-507; "Religious Conviction in the Profession of Arms," (with CAPT William R. Rubel), *Journal of Military Ethics*, 11/3 (November, 2012): 171-185; "Shari'a Reasoning and the Justice of Religious War," *Philosophia*, 40/2 (June, 2012): 195-211; Christopher J. Eberle, **Justice and the Just War Tradition**, Routledge, 2016). I am currently at work on a manuscript on religion and war, tentatively entitled, **God and War: An Exploration**.