

Military chaplaincy in the Netherlands **by Chief of chaplains AJH van Vilsteren**

at the occasion of the AMI conference in Vught, the Netherlands, 2016.

Introductory remarks

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

It's my pleasure to welcome you at this conference on behalf of the Military Chaplaincies in the Netherlands, which I do, on behalf of all the six denominations of military chaplains working for the Dutch armed forces: the Jewish, Protestant, secular humanist, Muslim and Hindu chaplains. I myself am Tom van Vilsteren and I am Chief of the Roman Catholic military chaplaincy here in the Netherlands, the sixth denomination.

I am honored to address you today about the basic backgrounds regarding the military chaplaincy services, which have some national characteristics. In order to understand military chaplaincy as it is established in the Netherlands, it may be useful to highlight parts of our national history especially with regard to religious freedom.

1. The Netherlands¹

The Netherlands is one of the most densely populated countries in the world, with approximately 17 million inhabitants. Dutch history and geography have molded population, which is, paradoxically, both fiercely independent and strongly committed to cooperation.

The independence of the Dutch has resulted in a surprisingly large degree of societal pluralism for so small a country. This was historically fostered by the low-lying, marshy ground of the deltas of the Rhine, Meuse and Scheldt rivers that resulted in areas developing in relative isolation from one another. This geography kept even the ancient Romans from uniting under their rule the area that is today the Netherlands. During the Middle Age this area consisted of several autonomous duchies. It was only in the late sixteenth century that a loose confederation of provinces came together to form one single republic.

The Protestant Reformation resulted in the Dutch being further divided between a Catholic south and a Protestant North. Protestantism contained Calvinist, Lutheran, Mennonite and

¹ The substance of this paragraph is quoting S. van Bijsterveld's excellent article: The Netherlands: Principled Pluralism, in: S.V Monsma and J.C Soper, The Challenge of Pluralism. Church and State in Five Democracies, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., Lanham etc. 2009, pp. 51-93., especially 51-

other groups. The pluralism did not hinder economic prosperity in the Dutch Golden Age, the “seventeenth” Century.

The commercial elites in Amsterdam and elsewhere concentrated more on making money than pursuing theological truth, with the result that the Dutch tolerated a variety of religious traditions, when much of Europe was still at war over religious issues. The result is that even today the Dutch are a mosaic of religious, ethnic and regional groupings, each jealous of its distinct identity and independence.

Nevertheless, the other part of the picture is a strong commitment to cooperation. The relentless battle to the sea is at the basis of this willingness to cooperate. Sixty percent of the population inhabits the 25 percent of the land area that is below sea level. This is made possible only by a complex, integrated series of canals, pumps and seawalls. So one might say that in the Netherlands survival has necessitated cooperation.

The famous Dutch tolerating for differing religious, ethnic and lifestyle groups is often said to arise out of the combination of these two qualities of independence and cooperation. ²

2. Nineteenth Century Liberalism and Religion in the Netherlands ³

In the nineteenth century, liberal Enlightenment thinking then ascendant in the western world confronted the Netherlands.

The Dutch liberals in the nineteenth century reacted against the old conservative order that had featured a semi-established Reformed Church (Hervormde Kerk) and a host of privileges for the aristocratic classes. In contrast, the liberals worked for more popular participation in government, a more limited role for the state, and no state favoritism towards religious groups. The liberal goal was a society marked by a consensus of values that were common and nonsectarian. The key instruments were education and propagation of liberal culture among all classes in order to broaden the circle of citizens and the basis of the state.

In the liberal view religion and ethics were not to be ignored in state based education; instead, children ought to be taught ‘Christianity above doctrinal differences’. But this approach would leave the diverse religious communities in the Netherlands aside. In the liberal scheme of things particularistic, diverse religious beliefs were to be relegated to the purely private sphere. And as the nineteenth century moved on, increasing opposition to this concept of religion and of education grew, especially among Catholics and no less among a number of orthodox Reformed groups within the large, semi established Hervormde Kerk and from the

End of quotes pp. 52-54.

Quotes are from s. van Bijsteld, op.cit., pp. 55 etcetera.

side of some had seceded from it, believing it was deserting traditional, orthodox Calvinist theology and practice. From out this opposition both the orthodox reformed and the Catholics started to develop their own political movements in the 1860s.

Ever since the 1860s Dutch society developed an ever stronger culture of 'principled pluralism' : the freedom of religion developed into the entitlement to deploy the religion. The freedom of religion is the right to have a religious or secular conviction - of course within the border framework of the laws of this country. So strictly and legally speaking it is the freedom of religion and to secular philosophical views of life that is implied in this basic human right. Historically speaking, the freedom of religion in the Netherlands is not just about the right to have religious convictions, but about the right to act accordingly, both in private and in public. This can be illustrated by the development of the legal dimension of religious freedom in the Netherlands.

3. Church and state relations

In 1795 Religious Freedom in the Netherlands was restored. The previously existing privileged position of the Calvinistic church as a monopolistic state church was ended. Jews became equally treated citizens and won their legal right to religious freedom too. Also the Catholics regained their religious freedom too. A symbol for the latter development was the right to hold a procession: a public religious event, which is evidently Catholic. From that moment on, religious pluralism had a legal basis in the Dutch Constitution.

But precisely because this constitutional change was about freedom, the Dutch developed a political culture of minimizing legislation with regard to religion. So historically, The Dutch do not like too much legislation or state based politics or policy development with regard to religion.

The principle of separation between Church and State as it is understood in the Netherlands has two key components. The first component is the freedom of conviction; the second is the mutual non-interference in terms of governance. The mutual respect for the self governance both of the state and the churches are a key to understand why there are six autonomous services for military chaplaincy. The argument is that this argument expresses that churches are entitled to self governance with regard to their core business: the deployment of pastoral care.

But to grant freedom of religion and of secular humanistic worldviews is not always as easy as it seems. In the nineteenth century, the Catholic military chaplaincy has been abolished after a conflict between the then King William I on one hand and the Catholic Church, about the right

of the king to publicly allow for a pontifical message, to which the King legally no longer was entitled. The Catholic military chaplaincy was only re-established at the eve of WWI in 1914, in the context of the mass mobilization.

In 1914 the government came to officially ask the Dutch cardinal for integration of Catholic military chaplains into a state based system. It took some time to convince the prelate to give up the private organization the Church had built after the dismissal of Catholic military chaplains seventy years before. This illustrates that the principle of mutual non - interference, which is essential for church and state relations in this country, is a rather precarious one, which requires a not always easy dialogue.

4. Military chaplaincy

It is quite obvious the above-mentioned four characteristics of religious culture also apply to military chaplaincy.

A. Above all, the Dutch military chaplaincy is pluralistic. It exists in six autonomous services: the Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, the secular humanistic, the Hindu and the Islamic Chaplaincy service. The **autonomy** is expressed not only in terms of the substance of the respective convictions, but it is also expressed in the structural autonomy of different services inside the military.

B. The second aspect of Dutch religious culture between denominations as a dimension is also present in the chaplaincy services. There are elements of common policy development, for example with regard to the deployment of military chaplains during military missions. This type of **cooperation** can be considered as functional, pragmatic cooperation, with the aim to optimize each denomination's pastoral entrance into the military during its deployment. In practice there are also several kinds of informal cooperation, often on a bilateral basis.

C. The third dimension of religious culture in the Netherlands, **the separation between state and church**, likewise is essential to understand military chaplaincy. Military chaplains have no military responsibility whatsoever, due to the Dutch model of separating church and state. Military commanders on their side are not entitled to define tasks for the military chaplains, because the Churches that send them to the military, define their mandate. By consequence, the military chaplains have a formally independent position inside the military as an institution. In fact they deploy an 'in confesso' presence, which provides room for an informal role as a pastoral caregiver, a pastoral educator, or an informal pastoral mediator, and an informal advisor to commanders.

One might expect that this formal independence combined with an informal pastoral role is a good recipe for trouble. But actually, the opposite is the case. Both politicians and religious leaders would not want other principles to guide the functioning of chaplaincy. On their side, the religious leaders keep up their autonomy and the possibility for informal exchange and cooperation without political pressure from the side of the state.

The politicians - members of parliament and Secretaries of Defense, would not like to see a military chaplain in a politically critical role, so they don't regard the military chaplaincy as a means to attain mission goals during military mission. But politicians do appreciate the common capacity of chaplains with regard to informal problem solving, informal care, and informal education. From their point of view, they see the Churches as an institutional guarantee for the independence and the quality of military chaplaincies. So the military chaplaincy is one of the domains in which state and church do cooperate.

The alternatives would be:

One: a type of church based chaplaincies without proper entries in the military, or,

Two: a state based chaplaincy, which would use chaplains as instrument for politics.

D. At the institutional level the separation between church and state leaves room for the **self-governance of denominations inside the military system**. Therefore there are six chief of military chaplaincy. Each of these appoint and dismiss military chaplains though a requirement of denominational consent or withdrawal of allowance to represent the denomination. Also the services have different emphases in the onus on post initial education and in priorities regarding the deployment of chaplains.

The present system functions, because military chaplains are very well educated and trained by all denominations, not only during their initial education, but in a type of permanent education helping them to properly function in the specific context of the military. At the institutional level the system may function well, because there is a never-ending dialogue between state and churches about the military chaplaincy in a search for consensus. So here is a counterbalance against the splendid isolation that may occur if only the autonomy were emphasized. Due to the focus on the military personnel the basic attitude is stabilized through a common type of pastoral ethics, in which the deployment of each military's freedom of religion is the test case for the quality of chaplaincy.

5. Mandates

One remarkable example of the Dutch system of governing military chaplaincy turns out in practice is the way mandates of civil servants in this sector are defined. Usually, elsewhere in the government, of course a Minister defines mandates of his civil servants, which is quite obvious due to the priority of politics above management issues inside the government. In the case of military chaplaincy however the dialogue between state and church has led to a reversal of mandates, that is the CEO chief of chaplains function as a steering committee for the Director of chaplaincy services who is not a chaplain. This has been realized after very long negotiations. Remarkably, there is a similarity with postmodern management theories which put content first again, as in education systems or in heart care systems. But the reason for this remarkable structure is based in national religious history.

6. Final remarks

Ladies and gentlemen, I come to a conclusion. The Netherlands has a quite unique and remarkable religious history, which visibly influences both the structure and the deployment of military chaplaincy. Of course, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Chaplains and chaplaincy services have been established to serve the military personnel in all ranks, functions and in all stages of their work. In the end, good chaplaincy is about seeing the deployment of the religious freedom of the soldier, by providing guidance in his quest for answers related to both private and professional life. The quality of chaplaincy may be tested by the way all denominations offer adequate pastoral care, not only to their own members but to anyone asking for it.

This requires a high ethical standard and a broad competency on these of the chaplains in terms of knowledge about pluralistic convictions.

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Netherlands!

