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Mechanisms for War Veterans Provided
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God, Guts, and Glory: An Investigation of Relational Support Mechanisms for War Veterans Provided by Religious Communities[†]

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Abstract

This article explores the mechanisms of congregational support provided by American churches to a sample of Christian soldiers who have been deployed into combat zones. I conducted qualitative interviews with six Christian soldiers to discover the congregational support provided by their faith communities. Additionally, one soldier who identified as atheist was interviewed. Through these interview sessions, three main mechanisms of relational support were discovered: the creation of divine associations of symbols and rhetoric, a hagiographic resource to mimic, and mutually beneficial protective services. In this article, I situate the research within previous scholarship pertaining to the relationship between religiosity and well-being, and I examine the mechanisms of support to evaluate the role of religious resources provided by faith communities in reintegrating combat soldiers into American society and legitimating military action. The Christian soldiers who were interviewed for this study consistently noted the importance of their faith communities during and after their deployment for their subjective well-being. The analysis suggests that with a high volume of soldiers returning from combat duty, religious organizations could prove vital in the soldiers' reintegration.

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“I’m a Christian and thou shall not kill. But if I am put in a position where it is me or somebody else, I feel like God is on my side and whatever I have to do . . . I have to do.” This is how Chris, a soldier in the first Persian Gulf War, expressed his position during my last interview session with him.¹ Chris was taking part in a research project being conducted to discover the mechanisms of support provided to veterans by religious communities. He was not unique in his sentiments. In fact, in long interview sessions with several soldiers, I recorded similar ideas repeatedly. Indeed, when discussing their return from participating in war, the interviewees made consistent connections between church, faith, spiritual support, and their own well-being. In addition, the Christian soldiers expressed a deep appreciation for their faith-based communities’ role in their lives before, during, and after their military deployment.

The goal of this article is to examine the mechanisms by which spiritual support has been provided to a sample of Christian soldiers in the U.S. Army who have returned from combat zones. Although a general scholarly consensus has formed regarding the positive relationship between religiosity and subjective well-being, little research has been conducted allowing religious subjects to describe in their own words the mechanisms by which religious organizations provide support during stressful periods in their lives. For this research, I conducted qualitative interviews with several self-identified Christian soldiers who have been active in combat zones. The goal of the interviews was to discover the modes of support provided by their respective churches. Literature discussing the relationship between religious participation and well-being supports my finding that for the soldiers who were interviewed, congregational support fills a pivotal role by creating divine associations of symbols and rhetoric; enabling an emphasis on the masculine, warrior portions of hagiographic resources (e.g., the Bible) for soldiers to mimic; and promoting mutually beneficial protective services. Each of these resources allows soldiers to legitimate their combat experiences while reintegrating into U.S. society.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE

Extensive literature has been published linking participation in religious organizations and subjective well-being (for a summary, see Koenig, McCullough, and Larson 2001). A broad range of scholarship in fields including sociology, psychology, and the epidemiology of religion has indicated that perceptions of well-being may increase when a subject participates in religious rituals or holds strongly to a religious belief system (Campbell, Yoon, and Johnstone 2008; Krause 2002, 2003, 2009; Levin 2001). As this literature has developed, different

¹ Chris is not the actual name of the interviewee. All names in this article have been modified for participants’ anonymity.

indicators of religiosity and well-being have been discussed. These discussions have led to the development of numerous specific research projects on the topic. For instance, various ways of measuring religiosity have included participation levels (Schumaker, 1992), forgiveness (McCullough, Pargament, and Thoresen 2000), and prayer (Levin and Taylor 1997), to name but a few. Additionally, many of the research projects focus on specific subgroups, such as denominational affiliation (Ellison et al. 2008) or age and race (Krause 2002).

Several scholars have approached this issue by using psychological analyses, which have suggested that religious organizations and religiosity serve as a stress buffer. “The stress-buffering hypothesis implies that religion has stronger positive effects on the well-being of individuals facing high levels of stress” (Dezutter et al. 2010: 508). Other researchers have credited religious organizations with providing social networks, informational and material support, and problem-solving assistance for helping individuals to cope with stress (Maton 1989). In addition, religious organizations offer opportunities for people with similar values to interact, and they promote fundamental social norms such as family structures; both of these aspects of organized religion reaffirm the value of members’ lifestyles (Ellison 1991; Krause et al. 2001).

Other scholars suggest that religion provides well-being because of perceived divine interactions. This theory proposes that devotees who retain a “sense of trust in God, believe that God is in control in their lives, believe that God knows what is best for them, and believe that God ultimately ensures they will get what they need” display higher levels of subjective well-being (Krause 2002: 335). Other researchers credit the certainty of divine guidance with “enhancing perceived well-being by deepening the sense of orderliness and predictability of events and by investing problematic situations with new religious meanings” (Ellison 1991: 81). Melvin Pollner theorized that subjects build relationships with a “divine other” in much the same way in which they construct relationships with family members and coworkers. He referred to this relationship with the “divine other” as the most pervasive in U.S. society and asserted that it was “related substantially to several dimensions of well-being and satisfaction” (Pollner 1989: 102).

There seems to be a general academic consensus in regard to the correlation between enhanced well-being and religiosity.² In an attempt to discover the processes of church support, B. Gail Frankel Perry conducted some of the first interviews with devotees of a specific religious tradition, namely, Christianity. After several interviews with self-identified Christians, she concluded that churches provide spiritual support through an integrative function of community, an assurance of peace, well-formed meaning systems, and a regulative function of behavioral constraints (Perry 1998). She stated that churches provide mechanisms that

² Not everyone agrees that the relationship between religious participation and well-being is positive (e.g., see Sloan 2006).

enhance congregant welfare that are centered on a concept of peace through an understanding of both the Old and New Testaments.

METHOD

Like Perry's analysis, my research is not concerned with the theoretical debates but rather focuses more narrowly on identifying the practices of Christian churches from members' perspectives. Instead of discovering formal, spiritual support provided by local churches through interviewing the leadership (ministers, elders, priests, etc.), I employed a bottom-up process of interviewing church members who were also soldiers who had been previously deployed into active combat duty. Several community-based research projects as well as ethnographic research have utilized a bottom-up process. For instance, Karen Curtis (1999) suggests that more bottom-up ethnographies could have positive impacts on global poverty and welfare policies. Application of this approach can provide insights from individuals who are clients or recipients of services. In my research, a bottom-up approach discovered the perceptions of congregational support that Christian soldiers maintain that they receive.

Many soldiers have difficult postwar experiences because of the psychological, social, and psychiatric toll of war. A 2007 study found that 62 percent of returning service members received various mental health care treatments, 27 percent consumed alcohol at dangerous levels, and 6 percent were diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (Erbes et al. 2009). The experience of war and the effects on soldiers' mental health can produce stress-inducing challenges in reintegration into nonmilitary employment and family life, thus making the soldiers valuable subjects in regard to accessing the mechanisms of spiritual support.

Methodologically, I used qualitative interviews to gather data and analytical conclusions. Steinar Kvale (1996: 30, 31) defined qualitative interviews as seeking "to describe the meanings of central themes in the life world of the subjects." He noted that informal (and, at times, formal) interviews allowed subjects to give their own perspective in their own words. In addition, I used a technique of semistructured interviews during the interview process. Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte (1999: 149) defined semistructured interviews as interviews that

combine the flexibility of the unstructured, open-ended interview with the directionality and agenda of the survey instrument to produce focused, qualitative, textual data at the factor level. The questions on a semi-structured interview guide are pre-formulated, but the answers to those questions are open-ended, they can be fully expanded at the discretion of the interviewer and the interviewee, and can be enhanced by probes.

I was able to use this technique in my research because of the soldiers' willingness to participate and full disclosure. Each interview was conducted privately and was recorded. All respondents were informed that their real names, the names of their churches, and any other identifiers would not be disclosed in this article.

I conducted a total of seven interviews. Four of the interviewees were soldiers who had been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan and self-identified as Christian. I conducted another interview with a soldier who self-identified as Christian but, because of health issues, had never been deployed. I also interviewed a member of the ROTC at a local university who self-identified as Christian; this young man will serve four to eight years in the military after he has earned his bachelor's degree. The seventh interviewee was a National Guardsman who had been deployed to Iraq but self-identified as an atheist. All the interviewees were Caucasian and male.³ All were twenty-two to twenty-eight years of age except Chris, who served in the first Persian Gulf War at the age of 40 and is now close to 60 years old. The individuals who self-identified as Christian were members of different Christian denominations: Southern Baptist, Independent Baptist, Free Will Baptist, Church of Christ, Presbyterian, and nondenominational affiliation.

Before conducting this research, I had previously become acquainted with two of the interviewees, Kenneth and Jackson. Two others volunteered in response to an announcement to a university class stating that research was being conducted pertaining to Christians who had a record of war deployment and military experience. After I interviewed these two, they supplied names of others to possibly interview. Out of this pool of names, I randomly selected other military personnel.

As an aside, I was not rejected by any of the men whom I approached and requested to interview. In fact, I had to turn some interviewees away because of the time constraints of the project. This is a very revealing characteristic of the soldiers. During the interviews, I had to ask very few questions. In essence, I discovered that the soldiers were seeking opportunities to discuss their experiences in war and military service. In fact, two of the soldiers revealed that they were attending support groups just to have an audience to whom they could tell their stories. Several thanked me for the opportunity to share their military experiences and were openly disappointed when I informed them that aliases would be used in the final product. Some suggested that the interview had been cathartic.

Overall, the interviewed soldiers were confident and calm. Several explained that they had never been confronted or critiqued about their participation in war. None of the Christian soldiers worried about their souls in the afterlife, they identified no tension between being a Christian and being a soldier, and all of them felt secure that their military actions were justified. As a matter of fact, all the

³ It would be interesting to conduct more interviews with minority military personnel (e.g., African-American, Latino, and female soldiers). However, the time constraints of the project did not permit me to conduct such interviews.

interviewees except for Jackson, who identified as an atheist, were extremely proud of both their military service and their faith organizations.⁴ As one soldier said, “Force was always authorized and for a just cause. I don’t feel in a sense that I did anything wrong. Or did anything that God wouldn’t like or disapprove of.”

As I conducted interviews with these soldiers, their words recalled many personal memories. In full disclosure, I should note that I was in the military during the Persian Gulf War in the early 1990s. I was never deployed into combat duty; however, I did serve as an assistant chaplain, officially known as a Religious Program Specialist. My previous experience in the military allowed me to understand much of the military terminology that the interviewees used and created an immediate social bond, allowing the soldiers to openly discuss their experiences.

When I began this research, I assumed that churches provided institution-wide celebrations or recognition services for each of their members who were in military service upon the member’s deployment and homecoming. I had hoped to get the details of these events as a legitimizing process for military service by religious congregants. Instead, I discovered that my assumption was incorrect. Only one soldier stated that he had been publicly recognized at a central Sunday service. This was especially moving for this soldier because his church (Church of Christ) prohibits applauding within its services.⁵ He stated that he had one memory as a young boy of his church congregation breaking normative practices and applauding for a man who happened to be an older World War II veteran. It was very encouraging to him that upon his return, he too was the recipient of applause by his church. The other soldiers stated that they were allowed to speak at a less-attended Bible study or evening worship service throughout the week but never during the main Sunday service.

Instead of an institutional-wide celebration or recognition, I found that the faith-based organizations’ role in disseminating support for soldiers is less formal, more individualized, and relational. For instance, all the respondents stated that they received an abundance of individual encouragement from their church communities.⁶ In this regard, one soldier described his church as “loving all over”

⁴ Neal Krause (2009) noted the connection between self-esteem and religious practice. Although his research did not employ psychological analysis, all of the self-identified Christians whom I interviewed seemed to have an acute awareness that they were divinely valued.

⁵ Southern Churches of Christ promote a worship that abides by the New Testament commandment to “make a joyful noise with your heart” during worship services. This prescription is interpreted to mean that musical instruments, which include applauding, are prohibited.

⁶ The lack of institution-wide recognition could be due to the controversial nature of the war in Iraq. The Pew Research Center (2008) noted that by the fifth year, that is, 2008, only 38 percent of those surveyed supported the war. This number was down from 72 percent support in March 2003. Many of the soldiers whom I interviewed were deployed in 2009. It would be interesting to know whether there were more institution-wide celebrations and recognitions during the early years of the war in Iraq.

him. Additionally, each soldier confirmed previous research indicating that religious organizations function as social networks and support. But the interviewed soldiers revealed very specific mechanisms of spiritual support provided for military personnel during their deployment and return.

SUPPLYING GIFTS OF DIVINE ASSOCIATIONS

“They just wanted to kill something,” Chris told me about the other members of his unit as we sat on a comfortable couch in his church’s youth room. The room was quiet, and Chris held his small terrier in his lap as he recalled his experiences in the first Persian Gulf War in 1991. Now close to 60 years old, Chris had no problems relaying several stories, and he was a great storyteller. He continued:

We had these guys and they had their flak jackets on. And we had an artist in the group and he’d paint “One Shot, One Kill.” They just wanted to kill something. So we come into this town and this ol’ dog was chewing on this dead Iraqi body. I mean that wasn’t funny, but . . . we just stopped there and the commander said, “That’s not right. Somebody shoot that dog.” I bet eighty people opened up with M16s and there was nothing left of that dog. I mean there were pieces of that dog just flying everywhere. He [the commander] finally got them to stop [shooting] and he said, “My fault. Next time, we’ll have a sharpshooter do this.”

Chris laughed hysterically as he remembered this story.

The first Persian Gulf War, also known as Operation Desert Storm, symbolically lasted a total of one hundred hours. In 1990, Iraqi troops moved into Kuwait when a conflict arose over oil production. The United Nations attempted a diplomatic resolution to solve the conflict. When this resolution failed, economic sanctions soon followed. However, Iraq refused to withdraw its troops from Kuwait by the officially mandated deadline of January 15, 1991, so the United States assembled a coalition of thirty-four countries to start air campaigns on January 17. Iraq quickly found that they were no match for the American-assembled convoy. In a little over a month, all Iraqi forces had been expelled from Kuwait.

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, Chris was one day away from retirement. He had registered for the National Guard on December 4, 1970, when he was 20 years old. Having served almost exactly twenty years, he was told on December 3, 1990, that all military retirements had been halted and he was going to be deployed to Iraq. So at age 40, Chris found himself in Iraq in charge of seventy soldiers, a compilation of three units, who were attempting to catch the lead convoy of Iraqi attackers. But his unit never caught up to any actual fighting. As Chris explained, “We hauled ammunition across the desert and never saw anything.”

At the very end of the interview, I asked Chris whether there was anything else that he could recall that he thought would be beneficial for me to know about

his experience. Again he mentioned the artist in his group, but this time his reflection was serious:

I wish you could see some of the Easter pictures that I have. I still have some [of the pictures]. This artist in our company could paint anything. [The soldiers] had built this berm around the back and they filled sandbags and made seats out of them for Easter sunrise service. They built three crosses and put them up. Then he [the artist] painted rocks with our unit crest on it. It's beautiful. There were some guys who got some really good [pictures] of the sunrise coming up over that berm with the crosses right there. We had such a good chaplain over there [in Iraq].

In response to his mention of the crosses that were built, I pressed Chris to further explain what the crosses and paintings meant to him. He stated, "It was like God was sitting there beside of me with his arm around me saying, 'Chris, it's going to be alright. I'm going to take care of you.' From that night on, I wasn't scared." In essence, the crosses, the painting, and the sunrise provided a divine assurance that safety and protection were being provided. The connection between the three crosses and the company insignia was obvious to Chris: It symbolized divine purpose and protection. It is also interesting to note that Chris referred to the pictures that he had kept. The very act of storing the photos of the Easter morning in Iraq demonstrates the continued value he attributed to the photos. Finally, at the end of the story, it is the chaplain, the religious figure of the story, who is given credit for the construction of the symbolic Easter site.

Like Chris, other soldiers described objects that they considered sacred from which they derived guidance and strength. Some talked about a cross necklace or a religious tattoo that kept them focused and calm during their war deployment. Others referred to a church bulletin that they had received in the mail. Each of these bulletins included a list of all their home church activities as well as a prayer listing that included the soldiers' names. Two of the soldiers stated that they held onto those bulletins because it was proof that people were praying for them back home.

Even Jackson, the self-described atheist, had an interesting story about a religious object that had been sent to him through the mail:

I got prayed for a lot by my friend. One of my best friends from scouts, he actually sent me a Bible. I did read a couple of the passages that he underlined for me. It was comforting. I don't have strong beliefs, but it did help—the fact that he did that for me. I mean, he bought that Bible for me and wrote in it.

For this atheist, the gift of a religious object during war deployment, in this case a Bible, provided comfort. I continued to question Jackson about the Bible verses.

He stated that he could not remember any of the verses that were underlined but assured me that he would bring me the Bible for my inspection. He clarified that it was not necessarily the Bible itself that he so valued, but rather its association with someone back home who was thinking about him. He also noted that the friend who sent him the Bible was currently a traveling evangelist.

It is interesting to note that in the case of the constructed Easter scene and the gift Bible, the items were given by a chaplain or evangelist, the items provided solace, and all of the items were maintained. The items themselves became a source of spiritual support, which offered immense comfort in a highly stressful experience. And just as each object communicated to the soldiers that they were highly valued by their loved ones and by a divine being, the objects became a symbol of that value and gained immeasurable worth. Additionally, the gifts of divine association were offered personally versus institutionally, which contributed to the impact of the symbol.

In addition to associating certain symbols with the divine, the Christian soldiers employed a rhetoric that was closely associated with scripture. All the Christian soldiers used words such as *service*, *mission*, and *calling* throughout the interview process. In fact, sometimes it was difficult to discern whether the soldiers were speaking of their religious journey or their war experiences.

Sociologist E. L. Idler conducted a study concerning the correlation of well-being and religious involvement of an elderly population. She discovered the same emphasis on religious symbols by her respondents that I found in interviewing the soldiers. Idler (1987: 229) described religious symbols as “a unique system of symbols . . . a consistent body of knowledge and a set of meanings that allow individuals to make sense of and cope with their experience.” B. Gail Frankel Perry also noted that symbols were of great importance to those whom she interviewed. She stated that the “symbols associated with the practice of Christianity and with church life—Scripture, prayer, and Communion—appear to be important contributors to well-being” (Perry 1998: 131).

Anthropologist Justin McDaniel noted a strong emphasis on protective amulets for a distinctly different religious group: Thai Buddhists. McDaniel (2011: 208) suggested that the amulets are more than just protective:

Amulets create communities and texts. The wonderings, reflections, and visualizations that take place while looking at an image . . . generate questions that can be posed to texts or help individuals develop new beliefs. The conversations that take place over the trading of amulets can be seen as emerging doctrine.

Although McDaniel’s work was conducted in a different context than mine, his insight into the emerging doctrines and creation of communities by way of amulets seems applicable to the soldiers as well. For the soldiers whom I interviewed, the symbols given by their spiritual leaders were transferred from a familiar space

(home) to an unfamiliar space (a war zone), resulting in a magnification in importance and value that continues to this day. The objects supplied by religious associates provided comfort, served as coping mechanisms, and created communal identities.

HAGIOGRAPHICAL MIMESIS

In 2005, Jason celebrated his twenty-first birthday in Iraq. He was deployed for a mission that he referred to as “CSI: Iraq.” In essence, he was part of a unit that investigated battle scenes in the aftermath of combat in an attempt to uncover any forensic evidence that might be useful. His group “put on gloves . . . and looked for video materials, ID making materials, weapons, and fingerprints by doing biometrics.” They were conducting field research on a war that had started two years earlier.

The second Persian Gulf War, also known as Operation Iraqi Freedom, was initiated when the United States and the United Kingdom accused then Iraqi President Saddam Hussein of possessing weapons of mass destruction. Although the military campaign was not as brief as the first Persian Gulf War, the coalition forces of the United States, the United Kingdom, and others countries did quickly end Hussein’s reign. However, meeting other objectives, such as establishing a more democratic government, proved to be a difficult task. U.S. soldiers continued to stay in Iraq hoping to find former government leaders, securing the state, and attempting to assist in setting up a stable government that would be able to defend itself. The war was officially declared over in December 2011, and the last U.S. troops left Iraq on December 18, 2011.

In the midst of the post-invasion turmoil, Jason found himself and his Marine unit conducting forensic investigations in Iraq. Jason had volunteered to be deployed even though he was assigned to a nondeployable unit. He is a self-described quiet guy who does not like to be the center of attention and had grown up attending a small Church of Christ congregation. During the interview, however, he talked quickly and energetically about his military experience. One of the first statements he made when I asked him to tell me about himself was “I’m glad that I could serve my country and be proud of my actions.”

When I asked Jason whether he had ever been confronted about identifying as a Christian and participating in war, he answered:

The Bible says “Thou shall not kill.” [And some people ask] How can you do that? But I look at it in the sense that God commanded people to kill. God had armies that he helped win. . . . God gave Samson the strength to pull pillars down and he killed a lot of people. God also gave him strength to kill thousands of men with the jawbone of an ox.

Jason started by stating the most obvious commandment in the Bible that can be applied to war: the Hebrew proscription against murder. However, he renegotiated this command by referencing a specific destructive command found in the book of Judges. The story of Samson's feats is familiar even to many people outside of the Abrahamic traditions. The Bible story recounts God's selection of Samson at an early age to lead the Israelites from under Philistine oppression. Samson was given extraordinary strength but was also explicitly commanded not to drink alcohol, cut his hair, or come into contact with a corpse. The story continues with Samson killing a lion with his bare hands, catching 300 foxes, and reportedly killing 1,000 men with the jawbone of a donkey. Eventually, Samson was defeated through the wiles of a woman who tricked him into revealing his secrets and then, while Samson was asleep, cut his hair, thus taking away his superhuman abilities. Because Samson's strength had been reduced to average, he was captured and imprisoned. Eventually, God gave Samson one last burst of energy to escape by pushing down the supporting pillars of a building, causing it to collapse, killing him and those who had imprisoned him.

Like Jason, most of the other Christian soldiers whom I interviewed made references to biblical figures without being prompted. The references were always to male characters found in the Christian Old Testament and involved obeying divine commandments. For instance, another soldier referenced the story of Jonah and the whale, which provided association and understanding for his own military experience.

Larry was a member of the U.S. Army stationed in California. He was part of the Airborne Infantry, a specialized group of paratroopers. Larry enlisted in 2005 and had high hopes of being deployed to Iraq. However, he was diagnosed with a severe medical issue that rendered him unable to complete his military commitment. He therefore was assigned desk duty. Because of his medical issue, inability to be deployed, and assignment at a desk, Larry fell into a deep depression that resulted in alcohol abuse. He told me that he knew the abuse was wrong because he had been raised in church; however, in his words, he was "running from God." Larry repeatedly talked about being obedient to God and following the divine commands. Toward the end of his interview, Larry referred to the story of Jonah:

I kind of look at my life as Jonah and the whale. When Jonah had a calling on his life to go preach to the Ninevites, and he was disobedient to God and he didn't want to go. So he ran from God. And when he ran from God, the waves started to roar and his life was being turned upside-down on this boat. And it's kind of how my life was too. It was crazy though when Jonah finally gave in, he went to the Gentiles on the boat and said, "Hey, the waves will stop if you throw me over. This is my fault." So, the Gentiles threw him overboard and all of a sudden the Gentiles started praising God because of it.

Larry associated much of his failure with being disobedient to God, like Jonah. Additionally, Larry attributed much of his present success to giving up his own desires and following God's plan for his life (like Jonah's eventual success).

It was with the story of the masculine, violent, and divinely inspired Samson that Jason aligned himself. The connections that Jason could make for his own life and those of other soldiers are not difficult to ascertain. This association permitted Jason to have a superhuman view of himself as a warrior of God, attribute any success to God who gave the abilities in the first place, and provide a divine calling for the task to be completed. For Larry, the story of Jonah reassured him that God accepts failures, that God's message needs to be proclaimed, and that his own life is valuable as long as he follows God's commands. The stories provided these men with a divine narrative to mimic and a heroic figure with whom to associate. When the soldiers identified with individual characters in the Old Testament—in contrast to Jesus in the New Testament, whom Christians proclaim to emulate—they also anticipated that their future lives would continue to be divinely navigated.

The divine interventions that were expressed through the hagiographical mimesis are not uncommon for religious people. Religious texts have the potential to enhance well-being, but not simply because the texts are “replete with guidance on how to deal with stressful situations” (Krause et al. 2001: 642). The daily guidance is definitely available for devotees, and many people utilize scriptures in this manner. I would suggest that a deeper relational bond is occurring between a devotee and the religious text and that this bond grants the text the ability to legitimate actions and provide comfort. Additional research noted that religious individuals “may resolve problematic situations more easily by defining them in terms of a biblical figure's plight and by considering their own personal conditions from the vantage point of the ‘God-role’” (Ellison 1991: 81). Owe Wikstrom (1987: 392) detailed this relational, hagiographic mimesis:

In the Christian tradition, one finds a lot of scenes in the Bible, where persons are described as living in interaction with God. In all of these human scenes, “The other” (God or Christ) is a counterpart. And, as God in the Bible is described and experienced as the God of history, he deals with man in this world and interacts with him in ordinary occurrences and events. [This] is seen as a sign from or an activity on the part of God, and is not attributed as nothing but an accident, or merely occasional, chance or fate.

In essence, soldiers found comfort, enhanced their own well-being, and legitimated their combat experiences by associating themselves with ancient religious characters. For many of the soldiers whom I interviewed, associations with the Old Testament God figure were pronounced. Many of these soldiers considered

the God figure in the Old Testament to be the ultimate warrior and understood themselves as simply being utilized by this divine soldier.

Several scholars (e.g., Elisha 2004; Malley 2004; Watt 2002) have suggested that there is a uniquely strong relationship between Christians and texts. Brian Malley (2004: 1) stated that for Christians, the Bible has achieved “a certain timelessness, a kind of superhistorical status, such that [Christians] continue to read, recite, and expound as part of social life. Such texts are ‘living and active.’” Susan Friend Harding (2000) noted specifically that evangelicals and fundamentalists utilize the stories of the Old Testament to justify their actions. One of the main arguments of Harding’s work is the idea that conservative Christians are continually struggling to self-identify to those whom they perceive as outsiders. Harding posits that Christians continually reinterpret their motives, history, and plans during their lives by associating with biblical stories and characters. James Bielo (2009: 50) summarized this thought succinctly:

Evangelicals assert an extremely close relationship between text and action. In other words, their logics for decision making—from everyday ethics to political voting, financial giving, and volunteering—are figured in biblical terms. . . . Evangelicals’ use of scripture to guide action is not completely uniform and typically takes shape in ad hoc and selective ways. Still, much of what Evangelicals do is presented and justified with explicit references to scripture.

Indeed, most of soldiers whom I interviewed embedded their war experiences in an Old Testament story or interpreted it through reference to a specific biblical figure without being specifically prompted to do so. In essence, emphasizing particular Old Testament stories created a relational, liturgical resource for the soldier to utilize.

The Old Testament stories that were referenced have been told repeatedly to the children of Christian devotees during Sunday school, at summer camps, and in other children’s educational programs. All the Christian soldiers whom I interviewed had attended churches from a young age and were active in their church’s educational programs. In fact, Bible studies or weekly Sunday Schools are a very important form of institutional programming provided by churches. It is estimated that over 30 million Protestants in the United States attend small group studies every week, and “Bible study contends strongly for being the most consequential form of religious practice to the ever-evolving contours of American Evangelicalism” (Bielo 2009: 3). The relationship with the biblical text as an ultimate authority supplies masculine, heroic Old Testament stories, which provide spiritual, social, and psychological support for military personnel.

MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL ROLES OF PROTECTOR

Allen is a Southern Baptist who grew up in church. He had been active in Sunday school, youth ministry, and then college ministry when he signed up for the U.S. Army. Since his youth, he had had a strong desire to be in the military. While in high school, he was a committed participant in the ROTC program on campus. In 2009, he was deployed to Iraq. I asked him whether he had ever received any critique for his love of the military and being a Christian. He replied:

The Bible says that shepherds have to defend their flock. . . . One of the reasons that I feel so strongly about this is that one of the ministers at [Allen's church] is retired military. He did twelve years enlisted duty as an enlisted tank crewman. He got out, went to seminary and became a chaplain. He was my mentor for the longest time and I asked him this question [about being a Christian and participating in the military and war] early on. He [said], "Big picture, we are the shepherds and we have to defend the flock. You live in America, and you want the freedom to worship freely unlike other countries who can't. You want to defend that. You want to defend what you love."

Allen had taken the idea of being a shepherd and applied it to his entire life. Numerous times, Allen referred to himself as a shepherd fulfilling his calling by serving in the military and the church. His mentor was an associate minister at his church. Allen explained that his mentor specifically "gave" Allen the Old Testament reference Psalm 144:1–2, which states:

Praise be to the LORD my Rock,
 who trains my hands for war,
 my fingers for battle.
 He is my loving God and my fortress,
 my stronghold and my deliverer,
 my shield, in whom I take refuge,
 who subdues peoples under me.

The psalm continues with verses extolling God to "send forth lightning and scatter the enemy; shoot your arrows and rout them." Allen stated that his minister *gave* him the verses, as if the minister possessed the verses. Maybe another way of stating it is to say that the minister transferred the protective power of the verses to Allen.⁷ Allen told me that he now *carries* these verses with him wherever he goes.

⁷ Indeed, many religious leaders are put into a precarious situation when it comes to devotees' participation in war. How does a minister offer support and comfort but also disavow the potential murder of other human beings? Some people have suggested that religious participants are in complete violation of scriptural prescriptions when they enter combat duty; however, instead of

But it is not only the soldiers who feel like shepherds or protectors of the flock. Chris described his church's dedication to the care of his family while he was in Iraq:

We were in the process of changing churches and we just started coming [to his current church]. . . . [My wife] had joined the church, but I hadn't. So, when I left I was not a member [of the church]. But, I had been here long enough that the church had really taken me in. The great part about it was that while I was gone [the church members] took care of [my wife and son] just like they had known them their entire lives. They were very good folks. [Chris lists several church members by name here.] . . . When I came back I was invited to speak at one of the [weekly Bible studies], and they let me tell my story. I told them that I really appreciated everything that they did for [my wife and son] while I was gone, and that I will be joining the church next Sunday. That's when I joined the church. They took care of my family while I was gone and I knew that this was the place to be.

Almost twenty years after this event, Chris is still an active member of his church.

In fact, all the Christian soldiers conveyed an idea that the church's commitment to taking care of their families during their deployments had a huge impact on their continued commitment to the church. Jason explained that several of the men of his church made sure that his parents' yard was mowed, and other members continually stopped by to offer encouraging words. Allen noted that several of the women in his church offered his mother the spiritual encouragement that she needed while he was deployed. In essence, while each of the soldiers was deployed, the church members took on the role of protector of the soldier's family.

Several of the soldiers used phrases such as "fighting for God and my country" or "protecting my church and my country." Two insights can be gained from the construction of these phrases. First, the soldiers' statements demonstrated a keen understanding of their role as protector at both micro and macro levels. Just as the soldiers were fighting for national issues, they also acknowledged their service to their religious group. Second, each of these soldiers mentioned their religious commitment first in their statement. This is not uncommon for American Christians. A recently conducted Pew Research poll found that many American

asking how Christians justify war, one must answer how Christians understand their military actions. This is not unique to Christianity. Daniel Kent noted that Buddhist monks of Sri Lanka have also been in this situation: "a preacher does not want to encourage soldiers to kill; on the other hand, he does not want soldiers to have any doubts that might put them in danger. At the same time, these monks hope that the soldiers to whom they preach will go into battle with selfless intentions. Rather than fighting for money or out of personal hatred, the monks urge the soldiers to adopt selfless intentions, such as the intention to protect the innocent and defenseless" (Kent 2010: 173). Like the monks, Christian ministers offer comfort and support to their own devotees. In addition, they offer soldiers a transcendental way of understanding their own actions.

Christians self-identify first in terms of religious identity rather than their national identity (Pew Research Center 2012). The importance of religious identity and religious communities enhances the perception that Christian soldiers are defending their local congregations as well as a transcendent purpose.

Previous research has acknowledged that “people are motivated to form and maintain interpersonal bonds” (Baumeister and Leary 1995: 497). This position has prompted many scholars to analyze the effect of religious interpersonal bonds as they relate to well-being, coping, and social support (Ellison and George 1994; Krause et al., 2001). The social support provided by coreligionists, may offer some devotees, “affirmation that their conduct and perceptions concerning daily events and community affairs are reasonable and appropriate” (Ellison and George 1994: 48). The interviews that I conducted for this research yielded a unique form of social support disseminated relationally to deployed military personnel. The interviews demonstrate an unofficial relational contract between the soldier and the religious community to provide mutually beneficial services of protection. Instinctively, members of the soldier’s religious community take on the responsibility of support for the soldier’s family and loved ones while the soldier is perceived as taking on the role of protector for the religious community. Again, the soldiers noted the congregational support versus formal, institutional support. This aspect of the church and deployed soldier’s relationship has not been researched. Hence the specific impact and effects of mutual protecting roles between congregations and deployed soldiers should be further researched to discover the sociological and psychological benefits for subjective well-being.

CONCLUSION

A couple of weeks after I conducted my last interview session, I reconnected unintentionally with Jackson, the self-declared atheist. We both happened to be attending the same event, and he inquired about my research. I expressed many of the ideas of relational support that I was discovering as I listened to my recorded interviews. Jackson simply nodded and stated that he was envious of the congregational support. He reminded me that he was extremely frustrated during his short deployment to Iraq, and he noted that he could have benefited from what the churches had provided for other soldiers.

Jackson was not alone in his frequent periods of frustration during his deployment in Iraq and Afghanistan. For instance, Allen described some of his frustrations while he was deployed in Iraq:

There were times that I was angry at the people, the culture, the rules that we had to follow, the whole situation. It wasn’t done the way that it could have been done better. . . . I didn’t lose my faith, but I questioned it a lot. I think that the big kicker for that was when they turned the chapel that we had on our operating

base into a housing facility for the some of the local Iraqis to live in. So we didn't really have a chapel for a while and it was the final straw. I was mad at everyone involved with that.

In fact, all the soldiers that I interviewed expressed several frustrations with their military experience. However, the Christian soldiers whom I interviewed seemed to exude a confidence that trumped their frustrations.

Many of the soldiers carried with them symbols as reminders of their military duty. For example, Allen has since had Psalm 144 tattooed on his back. Likewise, Jason has "USMC" (United States Marine Corps) tattooed on his arm. Larry carries his Bible everywhere that he goes, and Chris carries a photo of three crosses in his wallet at all times. The religious symbols remind the soldiers of their military service to their country but also reinforce the idea that they participated in a divine service as well. As Allen told me, "God has given people the ability to train me and other Christians in how to defend themselves, their friends in arms, and the country that they love."

In addition, each of the men discovered legitimation from the retelling of certain biblical narratives. Violent stories, such as those of Samson and Jonah, as well as Psalm 144 assure the soldiers that their actions are justified by their country, their church, and ultimately the God they serve. Many of the men whom I interviewed now teach and preach to young people at their own churches and parachurch organizations (e.g., campus ministries). They are continuing a legacy by emphasizing the same stories that have reassured them to the next generation.

The Christian soldiers will not soon forget the care and protection afforded to their family members in their absence. All of these soldiers maintains a high level of appreciation for the service that members of their religious communities provided during their deployment. In fact, all still attend the same churches they did before they were deployed. The mutual roles of protector forge deep and long-lasting relationships, which reinforce the necessity for the religious organization. As Jason stated, "All the close calls [near death war experiences] does reaffirm my church participation. I do try my best now to make it to church and I feel that God realizes that. I feel that [God] knows that I give it my max effort."

Kenneth Maton's research delineated four distinct aspects of religious support: spiritual coping (prayer), spiritual support (perceived comfort from God), congregational coping (rituals), and congregational support (support from fellow congregants). He found that for people in high-stress situations, "church attendance was not significantly related to well-being; nor, for example might doctrinal orthodoxy . . . necessarily be expected to be related to well-being for high life stress subsamples" (Maton 1989: 320). Instead, it was "extensive small-group structures and widespread member involvement" that was of great importance for providing support (Maton 1989: 321). Indeed, the congregational support that is

provided to military personnel deployed in combat zones is overwhelmingly provided by individual members of the congregation and not necessarily formally by the institution. Also, congregational support provides an opportunity for Christian devotees to develop their own agency as ministers and protectors.

Rates of suicide and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are increasing among military personnel in the United States. Figures released for the first six months of 2012 confirmed that more military personnel had committed suicide than had been killed on the battlefield (Williams 2012). Specifically, 2012 witnessed an 18 percent increase in military suicides compared to the same period in 2011. Also on the increase were combat-related PTSD diagnoses. Of the two million deployed military personnel who seek medical attention, it is estimated that over 56 percent are diagnosed with multiple mental disorders, of which PTSD is prevalent (Kaiser 2012). PTSD can lead to relational, substance abuse, and financial problems. At a time when soldiers are returning home from combat deployment, the necessity of relational, support services provided by local religious organizations should be given more attention. The role of religious organizations in assimilating and reintegrating combat duty soldiers into U.S. society could prove extremely essential for the well-being of numerous military personnel and their families.

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