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ORIGINAL PAPER

Upholding Human Dignity as a First Principle: Preventive Moral Injury Work in NATO Chaplaincy

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Abstract

This reflective article proposes a strategic principle for North Atlantic Treaty Orgnization (NATO) military chaplaincy services aimed at strengthening preventive efforts related to moral injury in war. Contemporary military research increasingly recognizes the moral, spiritual and existential consequences of warfare, which are not fully addressed by traditional psychiatric models, yet a growing body of scholarship highlights the role that chaplains may play in addressing moral injury. However, knowledge of how to prevent moral injury during ongoing full-scale war remains limited. The article draws on empirical insights from Ukrainian military chaplains operating in a context of full-scale war, where their work largely centers on sustaining ethics, morality, and character among military personnel. From these experiences, an overarching principle is derived: human dignity first. Defending human dignity is understood as a continuous effort to counter dehumanization and preserve the human dimension in a context that persistently erodes moral boundaries. Within NATO, each member state retains full responsibility for its own chaplaincy services, making structural standardization neither feasible nor desirable. This article argues, however, that the principle of human dignity first can function as a unifying, non-programmatic framework for NATO chaplaincy without altering national structures, roles, or cultural contexts. At the same time, it supports operational effectiveness, leadership, and decision-making and may be understood as an implicit preventive approach to moral injury. In conclusion, human dignity first is proposed as a strategic principle that may strengthen cohesion, interoperability, and long-term sustainability within NATO military chaplaincy.

Keywords NATO · Military chaplaincy · Human dignity · Strategic · Moral injury · Prevention

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Introduction

War generates a wide range of strains and challenges for military personnel, affecting the whole person, from endurance and operational capacity to profound inner states that reach deeply into the human psyche (Figley & Nash, 2015). From the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, the various effects of war on military personnel were described using different terms in the aftermath of battle, including nostalgia, soldier's heart, shell shock, war fatigue or combat fatigue, and ultimately PTSD, a comparatively recent concept that began to be formalized in the 1980s (Jones, 2006; Tick, 2005).

The two world wars of the twentieth century were of great significance for the advancement of modern medicine, including the dominant role of psychiatry in classifying and understanding health and illness (Bradby, 2016). The development of military psychiatry followed a particularly expansive trajectory during these wars and subsequently consolidated its position within armed forces worldwide (Moss & Prince, 2014).

Two major processes were at play. First, the military had a strong need for functional personnel in wartime. Second, psychiatry advanced its claims to define and investigate what was considered healthy and sick. Today, military psychiatry constitutes the leading and defining knowledge paradigm and practice within a Western military context (Grimell, 2024). It encompasses recruitment, selection, and training, as well as the screening, evaluation, diagnosis, and treatment of illness (Moss & Prince, 2014).

The Moral Turn in Veteran Psychiatry

However, over the past three decades, there has been a growing recognition, including within psychiatry and clinical practice, that this relatively narrow framework does not fully capture or address the profound challenges faced by veterans returning from the battlefield (Barr et al., 2022; Bryan et al., 2018; Hodgson & Carey, 2017; Litz et al., 2009; Mattson et al., 2025; Shay & Munroe, 1998). The emergence of the concept of moral injury represents one important development in this regard. Notably, the concept was originally articulated by clinicians in response to the perceived limitations of psychiatry in addressing the experiences of the US veterans in the aftermath of the Vietnam War (Shay, 2002, 2003; Shay & Munroe, 1998).

A further significant development in what may be described as the moral turn in psychiatry was recently consolidated in the American Psychiatric Association's DSM-5-TR (Mattson et al., 2025). The DSM-5-TR defines moral problems as experiences that disrupt one's understanding of right and wrong, or one's sense of goodness in oneself, others, or institutions (American Psychiatric Association, 2025).

As Alexander (2018) observes, forms of distress associated with moral injury can challenge the epistemological boundaries of the psychiatric paradigm. When clinical frameworks are applied as the sole or primary interpretive tools, there is a risk of extending diagnostic categories beyond their intended scope, of pathologizing

symbolic or spiritually inflected language, or of marginalizing primary concerns related to moral coherence, responsibility, and meaning attribution. These limitations have led a growing number of scholars and practitioners to question the adequacy of psychiatry as a standalone response to moral injury and to argue instead for complementary approaches capable of engaging the ethical, existential, and symbolic dimensions of suffering (Alexander, 2018; Atuel et al., 2021; Carey & Hodgson, 2018; Wortmann et al., 2017).

The Role of Military Chaplains in Mitigating Moral Injury

As ethical and moral dimensions are increasingly recognized within contemporary psychiatry, the role of chaplains has gained renewed relevance in recent decades in addressing phenomena such as moral injury, traumatic grief, betrayal, or identity disruption, both within and beyond military contexts. Military chaplains (hereon MCs) are typically present among military personnel. They often operate in uniform and share aspects of daily life with service members, drawing on their expertise in existential, spiritual, and religious matters. There is now broad agreement that MCs can play a central role in addressing and caring for ethical and moral conflicts and injuries (Carey & Hodgson, 2018; Carey et al., 2016a; Grimell et al., 2026; Hynes et al., 2025; Karle & Peuckmann, 2022; Koenig et al., 2026a; Mudde et al., 2025a,b).

At the same time, research on moral injury remains weighted toward the post-deployment context. In other words, it has largely developed in relation to supporting veterans in civilian life, and much of the field has focused on veteran populations. Consequently, research on how to prevent and manage moral injury during ongoing armed conflict and full-scale war remains limited (Phelps et al., 2024; Williamson et. al., 2025). Some of the most compelling empirical insights may currently be drawn from MCs operating in the war in Ukraine (Grimell, 2025a-d), as will be elaborated later in this article.

Moral Awareness in NATO Without Strategy: The Missing Role of Military Chaplaincy

Within NATO, there is also a growing awareness of the moral challenges inherent to the battlefield and the need to better understand and address them in order to maintain effective military personnel during war and to support their continued well-being. This is exemplified, among other initiatives, by the NATO Human Factors and Medicine Research Task Group 352, which began its work in 2022 and remains engaged in examining the moral challenges associated with future security environments (see Nato Science and Technology Organization activity details, 2022a).

Within a NATO context, however, several constraints must be addressed to enable MCs across national contexts to engage strategically in the prevention and management of moral injury before, during, and after deployment. This is particularly important in the pre-deployment phase and, above all, during active operations, as preventive efforts undertaken during operations may reduce the risk of moral injury in the post-deployment phase. Such considerations are especially relevant in the

context of full-scale war, such as in Ukraine. In this setting, conflict cannot easily be divided into traditional deployment cycles and is characterized by prolonged engagement, as well as processes of moral disintegration and erosion of character (Grimell, 2025b-d).

One such constraint is that all military chaplaincy services are governed and regulated by their respective member and partner countries (Grimell et al., 2025). Each nation maintains its own frameworks, governance structures, mandates, and employment conditions for MCs (Grimell & Letovaltseva, 2025). This makes it neither feasible nor desirable to impose a unified internal model across different national contexts. At the same time, not all MCs within NATO are familiar with or conceptually equipped to engage with the notion of moral injury. Even experts responsible for preparing MCs for deployment may not be fully aware of the significance of their contribution to reducing moral injury. Consequently, training in this area remains insufficient.

Purpose

The purpose of this reflective article is to propose a strategic principle for NATO Military chaplaincy. This principle could serve as an overarching framework for the work of MCs. It seeks to bring greater coherence across national chaplaincy services within NATO, while recognizing and respecting that member states and partner nations will continue to operate autonomously and remain faithful to their own frameworks, governance structures, and mandates. This strategic principle could serve as a unifying principle for MCs of diverse faith traditions and backgrounds, and recognized as a core value within NATO's military structures and, potentially, in wider contexts.

A Reflective Approach

The proposed principle developed in this reflective article is informed by the emerging concept of moral injury, scholarship on the role of MCs in relation to moral injury, and empirical insights from the war in Ukraine. It further draws on the authors' longstanding involvement in multiple NATO exploratory, workshop, and research task group initiatives, with particular relevance to military chaplaincy. The authors' familiarity with NATO chaplaincy is substantial, as several have, over a number of years, served as members and co-chairs, with one also serving as chair, of multiple exploratory, workshop, and research task groups under the NATO Science and Technology Organization (STO NATO, 2026), specifically within the Human Factors and Medicine Panel. This sustained engagement has provided in-depth insight into both the potential and the challenges associated with strategic issues concerning military chaplaincy in a NATO context.

At the same time, this reflective article stands as an independent contribution, originating within the European Research Unit for Military Chaplaincy located at Umeå University.

The reflection proceeds in a stepwise manner. It begins with the concept of moral injury, followed by consideration of the role of MCs, and subsequently engages with experiences from the war in Ukraine. On this basis, a strategic principle for preventive moral injury work in NATO is proposed, elaborated in terms of its meaning and practical implications, and brought together in a concluding synthesis. The article tentatively advances an approach that may contribute to the prevention of moral injury, whether or not the concept itself is explicitly recognized or applied.

The Emerging Concept of Moral Injury

The concept of moral injury was first introduced by Shay and Munroe (1998) during their clinical work with the US Vietnam veterans suffering from PTSD. At the time, existing treatment approaches were insufficient, and Shay and Munroe identified a moral dimension as central to understanding the veterans' suffering. Their definition emphasized betrayal in leadership and was formulated as the experience of being betrayed in relation to what is perceived as morally right within a given cultural context, by someone who holds legitimate authority within the social system, in high-stakes situations (Shay, 2014).

This sense of betrayal was closely linked to leadership on the battlefield. However, there was also a broader and significant sociopolitical dimension. The Vietnam War lacked deeper legitimacy among the general public and was, in many respects, not perceived as morally justified. Widespread protests against the war further intensified this dynamic. The broader social and historical context amplified the experience of betrayal in relation to what individuals themselves perceived as morally right at the time (Shay, 2002). This extended beyond the operational military environment to include a perceived failure of both military and political leadership, which had deployed personnel to war only to subsequently distance itself from the conflict and its veterans (Shay, 2002, 2003).

A few years into the Afghanistan War, Litz et al. (2009) proposed an alternative definition that placed greater emphasis on the individual. The situation in this war differed in several ways from the Vietnam War. For example, there was stronger political support for the mission. At the same time, the enemy was not always a traditional uniformed combatant, but could be a woman in traditional clothing or even a child who had been used to carry an explosive vest or detonate improvised devices. This challenged established moral boundaries regarding who could be considered a potential adversary, blurring traditional moral distinctions and creating new risks of perceived moral transgressions in the line of duty (Grimell, 2022). According to Litz and colleagues, moral injury may arise when individuals perpetrate, fail to prevent, witness, or learn about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations. This perspective is inherently subjective and process-oriented. Experiences that may not initially be perceived as morally conflicting can, over time, come to be understood as violations of one's personal moral framework. This more individualized definition broadens the range of potentially morally injurious events, which may occur in direct connection to specific incidents or emerge later in life.

Since 2009, the concept of moral injury has gained increasing scholarly attention. As the field has evolved, both syntheses of earlier definitions and new conceptualizations have emerged, particularly within North American contexts (e.g., Atuel et al., 2021; Farnsworth et al., 2014; Graham, 2017; VanderWeele et al., 2025), the Australian context (Hodgson & Carey, 2017), and the UK context (e.g., Williamson et al., 2019, 2020, 2025).

Hodgson and Carey (2017), in particular, provide a rigorous and comprehensive synthesis of existing definitions, offering a conceptual analysis of the challenges associated with moral injury while underscoring its exploratory, interdisciplinary, and emerging character. They also propose a broader, integrative definition of moral injury, sometimes described as consensus-oriented, in their subsequent work (Carey & Hodgson, 2018).

The growing recognition of the concept culminated, in 2025, in its inclusion as a Z code in the APA DSM-5-TR (Mattsson et al., 2025). In this revised edition, moral problems, including moral dilemmas, moral distress, and moral injury, were formally recognized, underscoring the increasing clinical, conceptual, and societal significance that moral injury has assumed since the 1990s. Over time, this development may contribute to a shift from understanding moral injury as a syndrome spectrum toward recognizing it as a more clearly categorized moral injury disorder (Koenig et al., 2026b).

An Interdisciplinary, Distinct, and Veteran-Tailored Concept

Moral injury is, in sum, an interdisciplinary concept that brings together researchers from multiple scientific fields, as well as clinicians and practitioners from diverse professional domains, including psychiatry, chaplaincy, and military chaplaincy (Carey & Hodgson, 2018; Hodgson & Carey, 2017).

There is broad consensus that moral injury is distinct from PTSD (Bryan et al., 2018; Koenig et al., 2026b). While the two may co-occur, moral injury is understood to involve a different underlying etiology (Barr et al., 2022). At its core, moral injury concerns moral experience, that is, how individuals understand right and wrong, and how perceived betrayals and transgressions of this boundary may give rise to profound psychological and existential distress. Such distress often includes intense feelings of guilt, shame, anger, bitterness, and depression, as well as disruptions related to identity and questions of who one is or has become (Atuel et al., 2025; Mattsson et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the concept of moral injury draws attention to an important dimension that is often overlooked in the risk assessment of military operations: the inherently toxic nature of violence (Powers, 2019). Military violence is typically distinguished between legitimate violence—*potestas* (Latin)—and illegitimate violence—*violentia* (Latin). This distinction is highly relevant from a legal perspective. From a phenomenological standpoint, however, different forms of violence are experienced in fundamentally similar ways. Soldiers encounter the reality that the acts of violence they carry out inhibit, harm, injure, and kill. In the immediacy of such

experiences, the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence plays only a secondary role for those involved.

It is only in the subsequent reflective interpretation of these experiences that questions of justification, whether the use of violence is considered legitimate, disproportionate, or unjustified, become salient. Yet experience precedes interpretation; thus, in the immediacy of the initial encounter, moral injury may already occur and may not be fully resolved through later reinterpretation. The risk of moral injury is, therefore, inherent in the use of violence, regardless of the legal framework (Behr, 2013; Molendijk, 2024; Schiewek, 2015).

It is also important to note that much of the existing research is weighted toward the post-deployment context, with a primary focus on veterans experiencing deteriorating health in civilian life.

The Spiritual and Religious Underpinnings of Moral Injury

Pathways to the recovery and healing of moral injury remain complex and not fully understood. However, there is a growing consensus that processes such as acceptance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration, concepts deeply rooted in religious, spiritual, and wisdom traditions, may play an important role in recovery (Atuel et al., 2021; Barr et al., 2022; Carey & Hodgson, 2018; Graham, 2017; Hodgson & Carey, 2017; Koenig et al., 2026a; Litz et al., 2009).

Against this background, it is hardly surprising that the symptom complex of moral injury has been examined with regard to its religious implications (Graham, 2017; Peuckmann, 2022). Within some of these approaches, related alternative constructs emerged early, including spiritual injury (Berg, 2011), a concept more explicitly grounded in faith than moral injury. Moreover, constructs such as the soul have likewise been invoked in relation to moral injury (e.g., Carey et al., 2016b; Graham, 2017; Grimell, 2018; Nakashima Brock & Lettini, 2012; Richardson et al., 2022).

These ongoing discussions contribute to refining the concept of moral injury. At the same time, however, they introduce new ambiguities, suggesting multiple interpretations of what is damaged by moral injury and how recovery may occur. Nevertheless, overarching commonalities can be identified, not least the wounding of something deep within the person—something that may be described as the soul or a similar inner dimension of the self (Carey & Hodgson, 2018; Carey et al., 2016b; Grimell, 2018; Hodgson & Carey, 2017; Nakashima Brock & Lettini, 2012; Richardson et al., 2022).

MCs and Moral Injury

As research on moral injury has emerged, a substantial body of literature has pointed to the potential of MCs to address such issues among both military personnel and, in particular, veterans (Carey et al., 2016a; Carey & Hodgson, 2018; Grimell et al., 2026; Hynes et al., 2025; Karle & Peuckmann, 2022; Koenig et al., 2026a; Mudde et al., 2025a,b; Smith-MacDonald et al., 2018; Wortmann et al., 2017). Again, much of this empirical research remains weighted toward the post-deployment context and

frequently focuses on veterans in civilian life, that is, when the injury has already fully manifested.

However, many forms of moral injury originate in the operational environment, that is, before the post-deployment phase (Litz et al., 2009; Shay, 2002, 2003). Potentially morally injurious events (PMIEs) often arise in this context through actions, decisions, leadership, or by witnessing events that conflict with what is perceived as right (Litz et al., 2009). Despite this, it remains difficult to conduct broader research on the prevention of ethical and moral challenges, including moral injury, among military personnel before and during deployment. One key reason is the limited access to active-duty personnel in operational settings.

As a result, the current state of knowledge in this area is significantly limited, particularly with regard to how such preventive efforts may be undertaken in the context of full-scale war. For this reason, research emerging from the war in Ukraine, which provides insight into these issues within real-time operational environments, is of particular importance and represents a rare and valuable contribution to the field. Underneath we outline how MCs contributed to preserving morality during ongoing combat, which range of practices they employed and how their efforts in defending human dignity in inhumane situations can be of inspiration for preventive work in the moral domain during deployment.

MCs in Ukraine as a Field-Based Example for Preventive Moral Injury Work in War

In 2024, commissioned research was conducted on behalf of the Swedish Armed Forces with the aim of learning from senior Ukrainian MCs and accessing their unique lessons learned from the war in Ukraine. Twelve MCs were interviewed, the majority of whom had been active since the onset of the war in 2014 (for further details, see Grimell, 2025a).

Maintaining Morality and Character in War: Countering the Erosion of Human Values

The Ukrainian MCs emphasized that a central component of their work involved upholding morality, ethics, and character among military personnel during wartime. They regarded this as essential for counteracting the moral erosion produced by the brutality of war, which distorts human values and norms. War was described as dehumanizing, fostering emotional numbness, and a gradual disintegration of moral orientation. At the same time, there was no ambiguity regarding the necessity for military personnel to kill in combat; such actions were understood as required for survival and for resisting the invader. However, these actions also stand in tension with broader societal ethical frameworks, rendering the MCs' work critical for sustaining soldiers' humanity and their capacity for sound moral judgment over time (Grimell, 2025b).

In contrast with standard NATO deployment cycles, which typically include extended recovery periods between missions, such structures are often absent in a full-scale war context, such as in Ukraine. Under these conditions, military personnel may remain at the front line until killed or injured, with only brief periods of leave. This continuous exposure intensifies cumulative moral and psychological strain (Grimell, 2025a–b).

The brutality of war, combined with prolonged temporal exposure, exerted a persistent and corrosive force on character, identity, ethics, and morality. War dissolves the taken-for-granted structures of everyday life—those norms, values, and identities that in peacetime provide individuals with clear moral and social orientation (Grimell, 2025b, 2025d).

Within this context, the notion of a war animal emerged, referring to soldiers who had lost their moral compass and capacity for rational reflection. MCs stressed that preserving morality was not in opposition to combat effectiveness; rather, it was a prerequisite for disciplined conduct and strategic decision-making. Addressing impulses of revenge toward captured enemies was also essential, as harming prisoners conflicted with both ethical principles and long-term strategic considerations (Grimell, 2025b).

To counter these dynamics, MCs employed a range of practices, including dialog, ethical reflection, sermons, relational presence, and structured reflective exercises. They also encouraged soldiers to attend to moments of beauty in everyday life as a way to counteract emotional detachment. These practices served not only to preserve soldiers' humanity but also to strengthen their resilience as warriors (Grimell, 2025b; Stetsiuk & Sengers, 2025).

Defenders of Humanity: Upholding Moral Values, Human Dignity, and Character in War

Several participants described themselves as defenders of humanity, highlighting their role in safeguarding human dignity in an inhumane context where such values are at risk of erosion. Their efforts were directed toward protecting human value, morality, and character among both soldiers and commanders, thereby preventing a gradual shift toward decisions that undermine moral integrity and dignity. They also emphasized the importance of treating Russian prisoners of war in an ethical and dignified manner, refraining from abuse or killing (Grimell, 2025b–d).

Although the participants did not use terms such as moral injury or preventive moral injury work, their practices can be understood as an operationalization of preventive moral injury work (Grimell et al., 2026). By continuously engaging with morality, character, and the preservation of human dignity in a context that actively erodes these foundations, they enacted a form of preventive practice. Defending human dignity in an inhumane situation can thus be conceptualized as a guiding principle that, in itself, functions to prevent the undoing of character and the development of moral injury.

Upholding Human Dignity: A Strategic Principle for Preventive Moral Injury in NATO Chaplaincy

Interoperability as a Strategic Principle

From a military point of view, most functions within NATO are interoperable. Standardization helps ensure that the armed forces of member and partner countries can work effectively together. To support this, NATO provides documents such as the Glossary of Terms and Definitions (AAP-06, 2020 edition) and doctrines, for example, the Allied Joint Doctrine for Communication and Information Systems (AJP-6, 2024). This is a fundamental requirement for the alliance. To achieve this, there are rules and standards to which member states' armed forces must adapt in order for operations to function effectively.

However, military chaplaincy constitutes an area that lies outside this standardization, and for which member states retain full responsibility. This is understandable, as different countries operate within distinct legal frameworks, roles, mandates, regulations, and systems of employment for their MCs, while also reflecting considerable religious diversity (Bock, 1998; Grimell et al., 2025). These differences emerge from the societies, cultures, and traditions in which they operate. From this context, chaplains derive their cultural capital and interpretative frameworks for their work. Their own cultural context provides both the source of strength and the necessary interpretative tools when war threatens human existence (Grimell & Letovaltseva, 2025).

Although there are similarities among MCs across NATO, there is also considerable societal and sociocultural diversity within the alliance. Consequently, there is no strong rationale for pursuing interoperability through standardization in this domain. Each member state should organize its military chaplaincy in a manner that best fits its own societal context (Grimell et al., 2026). However, interoperability could instead be strengthened by introducing an overarching principle that exists beyond national and cultural frameworks and responsibilities, one that can be broadly shared across member states and allied partners.

A Field-Based Logic for the Principle

The following points constitute the basis of this principle, derived from the case study of Ukrainian MCs:

- Research has shown that one of the main lessons from experienced Ukrainian wartime MCs concerns maintaining morality, ethics, and character among military personnel. This is closely linked to maintaining the capacity to fight and conduct warfare in a rational and disciplined manner.
- This is also connected to the need, to the greatest extent possible in full-scale war, and to prevent the erosion and loss of ethical and moral boundaries. In other words, it involves counteracting the emergence of a state in which individuals

operate without humane limits, potentially committing severe moral transgressions that, in the post-war civilian phase, may be extremely difficult for veterans to live with and for society to manage.
- This concerns not only the individual soldier, but also the spirit in which leadership is exercised and war as a whole is conducted—that is, it encompasses the individual, leadership, and the prevailing ethos on the battlefield.
- It also relates to "winning" a war in a moral sense, meaning that the international community attributes moral legitimacy to one of the parties based on the principle of defending human dignity—toward one's own forces, in relation to the enemy (for example, prisoners of war), and toward the civilian population.
- The example from Ukraine shows that, regardless of the methods used each day to maintain ethics, morals, and character among soldiers and commanders, one main idea stands out: to defend human dignity, both within the individual and in relation to others, and to place it at the center of war.

Such an idea readily presents itself as a distinct narrative, one that—in a constructive sense—embodies a culture of heroism with stabilizing effects on identity and values. That this culture of heroism is inherently ambivalent is self-evident. Here again, a domain of responsibility emerges for MCs, who can accompany such a positive narrative in a reflective manner, in order to identify and draw attention to potential problematic developments.

The principle of "human dignity first" could serve as a strategic foundation for NATO military chaplaincy. It would enhance interoperability by providing a shared overarching objective that MCs across NATO can work toward within their respective national frameworks and responsibilities. Regardless of whether chaplains operate within religious, spiritual, or humanist traditions, this principle appears broadly applicable and acceptable.

From a military point of view, this principle can support two important processes. First, it helps NATO allies maintain personnel who are ethical, morally strong, and resilient in wartime, even in a context that constantly erodes moral boundaries and character. Second, it supports efforts to prevent mental health problems, with a focus on moral injury. This supports both military psychiatry and the wider healthcare system.

Below, we offer a brief and non-exhaustive introduction to the concept of human dignity, outlining how and why it may serve as a guiding principle for military chaplaincy across the diverse national, cultural, and religious contexts of NATO member states.

Human Dignity First: Its Meaning, Practice, and a Bio-Psycho-Social-Spiritual Approach

Meaning

The concept of human dignity acts in many ways as a core principle of international humanitarian law, such as the Geneva Conventions (1949), and the laws of war. It upholds and warrants human inherent worth even in war situations.

Within the context of war, the principle of upholding human dignity can be understood as a basic ethical orientation, where the human being must never be reduced to a means for military goals. This orientation is not self-enacting but requires actors who can articulate, interpret, and sustain it in practice. In this context, MCs work to uphold and safeguard this perspective. To uphold human dignity therefore does not only mean to follow laws and rules, but to actively protect the value of the human person, even in situations where the destruction of war tends to break this down, dehumanize individuals, and strip away human dignity.

This points to a deeper, moral, and existential meaning of the concept of human dignity. At a phenomenological level, human dignity appears pre-reflectively, in the actual encounter one has with a specific human being, in the form of an appeal not to harm. Recognizing the other's dignity involves responding to this appeal by taking up responsibility for the other's well-being (Atterton, 2014). Human dignity thus concerns human beings' existential, religious, spiritual, moral, and ethical life. In the context of ongoing combat, MCs have a special role when it comes to defending human dignity, as their competence is rooted in these traditions and practices (Carey & Hodgson, 2018; Carey et al., 2016a; Koenig et al., 2026a; Liuski & Grimell, 2022; Mudde et al., 2025a,b). This role not only involves drawing attention to the human dignity of all human beings who are affected by war (combatants of either of the parties engaged in war, their families, and local populations). It also includes recognizing that in any act of violence human dignity is impaired, and that violation of human dignity is, therefore, to some extent inherent to war (see also Hasenclever, 2014).

Within a NATO context, the principle of upholding human dignity can serve as a unifying foundation for military chaplaincy services. This may involve introducing new programs and standardized training, but more importantly making visible and viewing existing practices from a new perspective, and strengthening the work that already takes place within the member states' own frameworks, tasks, and methods under a broader guiding principle. MCs already, to varying degrees, work with issues related to ethics, morality, and character (Grimell et al., 2025; Schuhmann et al., 2023), but with increased awareness, this work can be more clearly understood as a way to defend human dignity and thereby prevent moral injury. This does not require MCs to be familiar with the concept itself. In this respect, practical work is more important than theoretical knowledge (Grimell et al., 2026). Recognizing human dignity as the overarching principle of MC will reduce moral injury, and at the same time, it will improve interoperability; moreover, the consistent application of this universal principle will help that

the military leaders and the partners of other support services quickly recognize the added value of MCs in operations.

The unifying principle for NATO chaplaincy emphasizes the need for a deeper understanding of a central perspective in full-scale war, namely, the work of defending human dignity. In full-scale war, where the boundaries of morality and humanity are constantly at risk of being eroded, this work becomes essential. By consciously working to maintain ethics, morality, and character among military personnel and commanders, MCs can help counter dehumanization, both of the enemy and of one's own view of human beings (Bandura, 2011; Zimbardo, 2008). As dehumanization has been linked to both moral injury and acts of retribution, training aimed at promoting humanity and reducing dehumanization may be important for prevention and rehabilitation (Hodgson et al., 2022; Hynes et al., 2025). MCs can also help ensure that leadership and decision-making do not erode or deteriorate under the pressure of the destructive conditions of prolonged war (Grimell, 2025b).

The deeper the understanding becomes of what it means to defend human dignity, the clearer the need for education and competence development may become. An important effect of this work is that it helps prevent the breakdown of morality and character, and thereby reduces the risk of transgressions and violations, not only of laws and conventions, but also of basic moral values and identities (Grimell, 2025c).

Practice

As noted, within NATO context, MCs operate across diverse national systems of governance, organization, and professional practice. This diversity implies that any shared guiding principle must be sufficiently robust to move across these different contexts while remaining meaningful within each of them. Rather than functioning as a fixed or uniformly defined concept, such a principle needs to retain a degree of interpretive openness. In this sense, the concept of human dignity can be understood as a "boundary object" (Star, 1989; Star & Griesemer, 1989): a concept that is sufficiently flexible to be interpreted differently across contexts, while still providing enough common ground to enable cooperation without requiring full consensus (Star, 2010).

Insights from research on how chaplains shape their practices in increasingly secularized and pluralized contexts help to clarify how this works in practice. Chaplains have been shown to move between different religious and worldview traditions not by promoting a fixed vision of the good, but by representing and safeguarding the *possibility* of goodness (Schuhmann et al., 2026; Schumann & Damen, 2018). In this regard, a focus on existential well-being—rather than on spirituality alone—has proven to be a promising avenue for fostering resonance across diverse worldviews and traditions (Smit et al., 2024; Stifoss-Hanssen et al., 2019). The concept of human dignity aligns with these existing practices: It does not prescribe a single substantive interpretation, but offers a shared moral language through which MCs can engage across differences while remaining rooted in their own traditions.

Research has shown that perhaps the most important how MCs put this is in practice lies within the presence of MCs in everyday reality, among military personnel

and commanders, in the middle of their lived experiences of war, blood, sweat, and tears (Otis, 2010; Stallinga, 2013). It is in this presence that their work gains its real meaning. Regardless of the specific methods or tasks, they have in different national contexts, their work can be understood as a concrete expression of defending human dignity and of upholding the principle of human dignity, and thereby as a preventive approach to moral injury (Grimell et al., 2026).

Because MCs often accompany units deployed in the field, they occupy a position that brings them into direct proximity with the ethical and human consequences of military action. Despite significant variation in their legal status and levels of tactical integration across national systems, chaplains are commonly among the few actors with an explicit responsibility to reflect on and uphold the human dimension in environments otherwise oriented toward combat, survival, and mission accomplishment (Moss & Prince, 2014). As a result, there is a structural risk that such responsibility may remain insufficiently carried by other functions in the field.

At the same time, MCs, through their particular background and competence, rooted in existential, religious, and spiritual traditions, as well as in military cultural understanding, are especially well prepared to address these issues (Bock, 1998). They can create space for reflection, support, and moral orientation in situations where such perspectives might otherwise disappear (Mudde et al., 2025b; Pleizier & Schuhmann, 2022; Schuhmann et al., 2023).

In this way, defend human dignity becomes not an abstract principle, but a lived practice, grounded in relationships, presence, and continuous work to preserve the human element in the most extreme conditions of war. Otherwise, the human dimension risks being lost, with consequences for military effectiveness and for health and well-being, especially in relation to moral injury, in both the short and long term.

Operationalizing Human Dignity through a Bio-Psycho-Social-Spiritual Approach

A bio-psycho-social-spiritual (BPSS) perspective (Engel, 1977; McKee & Chappel, 1992; Sulmasy, 2002) may help clarify what the defense of human dignity entails in practice within military contexts. Threats to human dignity in war are rarely confined to a single dimension of human existence, but instead tend to affect biological, psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions simultaneously. In this respect, the BPSS framework offers a way of operationalizing human dignity while remaining consistent with its broader existential and moral meaning.

From a biological perspective, defending human dignity involves safeguarding bodily integrity and protecting individuals from torture, abuse, degrading treatment, unnecessary suffering, and insufficient care (Zimbardo, 2007).

Psychologically, it includes protecting individuals from severe trauma exposure, humiliation, moral disorientation, and other forms of psychological harm associated with combat and violence that may contribute to long-term suffering and moral injury (Litz et al., 2009).

The social dimension concerns the preservation of trust, cohesion, relational belonging, and the social fabric within military units, civilian populations, and even in relation to enemy combatants (Shay, 2002, 2003).

Finally, the spiritual dimension relates to existential meaning, moral orientation, conscience, faith, worldview, and the protection of those deeper sources of identity and conviction through which human beings understand themselves and the world (Carey & Hodgson, 2018; Mattsson et al., 2025).

Seen in this way, moral injury may also be understood as involving injuries across multiple interconnected domains of human existence rather than as an exclusively psychological phenomenon (Atuel et al., 2021; Carey & Hodgson, 2018; Carey et al., 2016b; Litz et al., 2009). This further clarifies the distinctive contribution of MCs in full-scale war. Because MCs operate precisely at the intersection of existential, moral, relational, and spiritual life, they are uniquely positioned to recognize forms of harm that might, otherwise, remain insufficiently addressed within predominantly tactical and operational environments (Grimell et al., 2025, 2026). A BPSS perspective, therefore, not only strengthens the conceptual foundation of MCs' work, but also helps make more visible how the defense of human dignity may contribute to the prevention and mitigation of moral injury.

Concluding Remarks

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between the interrelated levels embedded, directly or indirectly, in the principle upholding human dignity first as a unifying idea for NATO military chaplaincy services. The figure shows, at its base, that a large proportion of MCs, whether ordained or non-ordained, come from different types of faith and humanist communities. This is not an unimportant detail, as in some countries, MCs still belong to, or are even employed by, their faith communities while serving as chaplains (Grimell et al., 2025). This means that these

Fig. 1 A conceptual model of NATO chaplaincy integrating embedded levels and the principle of upholding human dignity first

communities, to varying degrees, may be implicitly or explicitly embedded within the armed forces.

At the middle level, the figure reflects the fact that, regardless of any NATO strategic principle related to military chaplaincy, all member states' chaplaincy services operate autonomously and independently. Their frameworks, tasks, and functions remain unchanged and must be deeply rooted in their own societies and cultures, from which they draw important cultural frames of reference.

The top level illustrates a NATO strategic principle, where the idea of upholding human dignity first for military chaplaincy services serves as a unifying principle among MCs across nations. While this cannot be stated with certainty, it is a reasonable assumption that both the base level (faith and humanist communities) and the middle level (armed forces chaplaincy services) could agree on the principle of upholding human dignity. It appears to be a general idea that can gain broad consensus without requiring changes to national frameworks for military chaplaincy.

A Unifying Strategic Principle Rather than a Detailed Program

Human dignity first is presented here as an overarching concept, encompassing its meaning, practice, and operationalization through a bio-psycho-social-spiritual approach. At the present stage, this provides a sufficient conceptual foundation for further theoretical and practical consideration. As a strategic guiding principle characterizing the work of MCs, it serves to uphold human dignity while allowing for a certain degree of cultural, structural, and functional flexibility. If it becomes too narrowly defined, some of its strength may be lost, and it may no longer fully align with national frameworks or directions, both military and faith community related.

We believe that such a principle could offer several advantages. It can help unify military chaplaincy across NATO without challenging the existing frameworks, roles, and functions within different member states and allied partners. There is value in more clearly bringing together MCs across NATO under a shared strategic idea that resonates with a preventive approach to moral injury. The principle is grounded in experiences from prolonged and full-scale war, experiences that are

Table 1 Military chaplains and the operationalization of human dignity through a bio-psycho-social-spiritual approach

BPSS dimension	Human dignity in military contexts
Biological	Safeguarding bodily integrity and protecting individuals from torture, abuse, degrading treatment, unnecessary suffering, and insufficient care
Psychological	Protecting individuals from severe trauma exposure, humiliation, moral disorientation, and other forms of psychological harm associated with combat and violence
Social	Preserving trust, cohesion, relational belonging, and the social fabric within military units, civilian populations, and relations with enemy combatants
Spiritual	Supporting spiritual, religious, existential meaning, moral orientation, conscience, faith, worldview, and the deeper sources of identity and conviction through which individuals understand themselves and the world

largely absent in the late modern context of many NATO countries. These are hard earned insights that should not be lost.

A Preventive Approach to Moral Injury

Working to uphold human dignity in full-scale war, within the individual, between individuals, and in leadership and decision-making (to the extent that this is possible), can also be understood as a preventive approach to moral injury, regardless of whether the concept itself is explicitly used.

We propose that the multifaceted nature of human dignity may be operationalized through a bio-psycho-social-spiritual framework, as illustrated in Table 1.

The link between upholding human dignity and maintaining ethics, morality, and character is strong, especially in a context that continuously erodes these qualities and gradually strips away what is human.

Alignment with Existing NATO Policy

Finally, the principle of human dignity, as articulated in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, provides a universally recognized normative foundation within the United Nations system. This principle is explicitly echoed in NATO's founding commitment to the purposes and principles of the UN Charter and more recently operationalized through the Alliance's Human Security approach (NATO, 2022b). As such, human dignity offers a coherent overarching reference for military chaplaincy within NATO's multinational framework, where diverse legal statuses, belief systems, and operational roles coexist.

Further academic reactions and discussion are, of course, welcome on whether this could be a helpful way forward for military chaplaincy in NATO, perhaps especially within the framework of the NATO Human Factors and Medicine Research Task Group 408 (Chaplains and Spiritual-Existential Well-being), the International Military Chiefs of Chaplains Conference (IMCCC), and the Military Chaplaincy Services Coordination Group (MCSCG).

Limitations

This reflective article is, inevitably, subject to several limitations. First, the concept of human dignity has been criticized for its openness to multiple interpretations (Bird, 2013), and even for being so indeterminate that it may be discarded without substantive loss of content (Den Hartogh, 2014; Macklin, 2003). However, we hope that our operationalization of BPSS has provided a means of addressing both the conceptual and substantive limitations of this construct.

Second, the empirical material from Ukraine is limited to the participants included in this study; other individuals may not share the experiences or perspectives articulated here. Third, the relationship between efforts to uphold morale, character, and human dignity in war, and the mitigation of moral injury, remains

hypothetical rather than empirically established. Demonstrating such a causal relationship would be extremely difficult in practice.

Accordingly, the argument advanced here should be understood as interpretive, grounded in the assumption that such efforts may carry a preventive potential. However, how individuals subsequently come to understand and interpret their actions, experiences, and what they have witnessed is inherently difficult to predict. It is, therefore, unlikely that any approach could provide a comprehensive safeguard against moral injury in the context of war.

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Ethical Approval Ethical approval was not required for this study.

Consent to Participate Not applicable.

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