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More than "someone to talk to": Possibilities for Chaplaincy in Leading Collective Moral Repair in Institutions

Introduction

It has been thirty years since Jonathan Shay presented his landmark definition of moral injury. While it has led to significant developments in identifying and understanding moral injury in individuals and small groups, Shay's definition also points to its more extensive, systemic causes. Military veterans like Tyler Boudreau, Michael Yandell, and scholars, including Dr. Rita Nakashima Brock, Dr. Joseph Wiinikka-Lydon, and Dr. Kelly Denton-Borhaug, underscored these systemic causes within the United States military's institutional culture. It is no surprise, then, that studies of moral injury have expanded to other institutions, including healthcare (Dean & Talbot, 2019), government (Dhabalia, 2024), religion (Brock, 2021), and higher education. (Hanna, Erickson, & Walker, 2022) While not named, moral injury is present in work on institutional betrayal (Smith & Freyd, 2014), restorative justice and trauma recovery (Barry, 2023), and somatic, social change (Josell, 2021).

However, this increased awareness of moral injury has not led to sweeping, collective repair efforts across institutions. One only needs to look at daily news of continued moral transgression and failed recovery to see their inadequacy: the resignation of the Archbishop of Canterbury (Aikman & Farley, 2024), continued firings of United States military commanders (Toropin, 2024), the rise of autocratic governments (Applebaum, 2024), and university presidents mishandling student protests (Wendling, 2024). In these examples, we have noticed that many of the voices naming moral injury and calling for collective repair come from *outside* the institutions they are examining. Our question is, "Who is best suited to identify moral injury

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and lead collective repair *within* institutions?" This paper posits that *chaplains, situated within the institutions they serve, provide ideal and unique possibilities to lead collective moral injury repair.*

Institutions & Moral Injury: Why is it happening?

While an in-depth analysis of institutional moral injury is beyond the scope of this paper, a brief discussion helps frame our primary question. We believe two myths perpetuate moral injury at an institutional level and, thus, are barriers to collective repair: a belief in institutional infallibility and benevolence, and moral injury as a phenomenon confined to individuals.

> Religions ....propose that their ideas and rules were established by an infallible superhuman authority, and are therefore free from all possibility of error, and should never be questioned or changed by fallible human beings." (Harari, 2024, p.71)

Author Yuval Noah Harari analyzes the role of information networks throughout history. Networks allow information to flow between people and are tools that enable people to work together to shape society for the common good. However, Harari argues that they no longer serve this function when assumed to be benevolent and infallible. Instead, they become structures that maintain institutional dominance and the belief that the institution itself is benevolent and infallible. In religion, sacred texts are presented as prescriptive and without error, although they contain inaccuracies and address realities that existed a millennia ago. Economic systems, where the accumulation of monetary resources is assumed to be for the common good, also allow for resources to be hoarded by a few at the expense of the exploitation and suffering of many. Institutional politics preserves executive-level interests and reputations at the expense of the welfare of employees. Viewed through the lens of moral injury, benevolence and infallibility are institutional myths that serve an essential function: they protect the institution's reputation and

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interests. If the institution and its structures are infallible and benevolent, then, the fault must lie elsewhere.

We turn to the second myth: moral injury as a phenomenon confined to individuals. Moral injuries are pathologized as mental health and stress-related issues that can be mitigated and "prevented" by promoting self-care aimed at reducing counterproductive behaviors. (Dean & Talbot, 2019, p.401) This belief is reductive, as researchers have demonstrated that causes of psychological suffering, including moral injury, are also due to organizational (Carey, et. al., 2016) and cultural factors. (Rogers-Vaughn, 2013, p.504) Self-care places the responsibility for healing and recovery solely on the individual. Supporting resources, even when provided by the institution, are often not adequate or accessible to be beneficial. Confining the phenomenon of moral injury to individuals also overemphasizes the moral failings of specific leaders, thus ignoring systemic and structural problems within the institution. Thus, it maintains the myth of institutional benevolence and infallibility.

These myths foster a culture of mistrust among those working within the institution, particularly between leaders and other bodies. Mistrust erodes cohesion in relationships, reinforcing conditions ripe for further and recurring moral injury. With moral injuries perpetuated and present in the institution, collective repair becomes nearly, if not wholly, impossible as everyone works to protect their own interests and wellbeing.   Harari writes,

> "Morality doesn't mean 'following [divine] commands.' It means 'reducing suffering.' Hence in order to act morally, you don't need to believe in any myth or story. You just need to develop a deep appreciation of suffering." (Harari, 2018, p.125)

 So, who within an organization can help deepen their appreciation of the suffering caused by moral injury, leading to meaningful and lasting collective repair?

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Overview of Chaplaincy & the Historic Role of Chaplains

Since its origins in the 4th century, chaplaincy has evolved from clergy strictly performing religious worship and acts. Today, it is a profession of religious leaders whose spiritual care meets a variety of needs and is integrated with other disciplines of care (Pulchaski, 2006). Chaplains' roles are tailored to the needs of the institutions they serve while also maintaining an identity rooted in the religious tradition they represent. Chaplains are held to common standards of practice in three areas: accommodation of religious needs and requests, providing confidential counsel and care for various emotional, social, and relational situations, and advisement that aids institutional decision making on morals, ethics, and culture. (Carey, et. al., 2016 & Baker, 2021)

Chaplains accommodate people's need for religious acts and rites, whether directly performing them according to the religious tradition they represent, or supporting specific needs of those outside the chaplain's tradition. For example, a Muslim chaplain serving in a military unit will perform traditional roles as an Imam for those who identify as Muslim, while also being responsible for accommodating the religious needs of those who identify as Christian or Buddhist. Chaplains also provide confidential spiritual care and counseling to all within their organization. This confidentiality allows people to talk to a chaplain without fear of it being entered into a professional or clinical record, potentially affecting their work status. Spiritual care and counseling often start by meeting generalized rather than faith-specific needs.   For example, university and college students will seek the chaplain when encountering struggles in classes, interpersonal relationships, and being away from their home of origin, rather than a specific religious struggle. Chaplains also provide moral and ethical advice to aid decisions at every level in an institution, including leadership. For example, chaplains in healthcare settings

serve on patient ethics councils; in the military, they have direct access to their commanding officers; in higher education, they serve at the senior administrative level. Recognizing the aspects of religion that intersect with secular fields to shape ethical cultures and people's morals (Wortmann, et al., 2017, p.251-252), chaplains are recognized as essential and trusted advisors in these areas.

Despite the professionalization of chaplaincy, chaplains' roles within their institutions are predominantly confined to a focus on individuals or small groups. Primarily utilized as a reactive resource when people encounter distress in the workplace, the chaplain is considered a friendly, compassionate listener - "someone good to talk to." They may be asked to fashion programs to address needs, but they are often considered additive and optional. However, these standards, along with increases in those utilizing chaplain services (Cadge, et. al., 2020), suggest that chaplains are uniquely positioned to identify systemic causes of harm and conflict within an institution, to include moral injury. Chaplains' deep awareness of the institution's emotional, interpersonal, and moral culture and unique position opens possibilities where they are leading collective repair..

Chaplaincy & Chaplains: Possibilities for Collective Repair

We see three possibilities where the role of chaplaincy can be expanded, and chaplains can lead collective repair.

- Chaplains as practitioners of collective, communal ritual.
- Chaplains as advisors with keen insight into the institution's culture and able to identify systemic and structural causes of moral injury.

- Chaplains as coaches providing moral and ethical counsel and coaching on collective repair, particularly to executive leadership.

Chaplains as practitioners of collective, communal ritual:

Researchers in psychology and spiritual care have demonstrated the effectiveness of rituals to help military personnel and veterans cope with moral injuries. (Antal, et. al., 2019, p.13-14 & Wortmann, et. al., p.253) Philosopher Alain de Botton, a professed atheist, acknowledges that religious practices and rituals help people "live together in communities of harmony" and help them "cope with terrifying degrees of pain" such as death, illness, violence, etc. (de Botton, 2012) This demonstrates that ritual is more than just assent to the supernatural or an act of religious devotion. Ritual is a powerful way to acknowledge and process moral injury, creating pathways for recovery. (N. Brock, 2024, p.214-229) We affirm this in our respective practices of chaplaincy, utilizing ritual in various ways for individuals and small units (Aaron) and students on campus (Chris).

We see the potential for utilizing rituals to initiate collective repair that reaches throughout an entire organization. Ritual creates a democratized space of inclusive, communal participation. Regardless of their status within the organization, each person can participate in the same actions and recite the same liturgy. Through ritual, an organization can acknowledge what has occurred without assigning blame or guilt to any individual or group. Ritual is also a means to create social cohesion and foster a more positive culture. (UNESCO, 2025) Chaplains, well-versed in religious rituals, are the best practitioners to develop inclusive, non-sectarian rituals that serve as a catalyst for collective moral repair.

Chaplains as advisors on institutional culture

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In the U.S. military, policy explicitly identifies chaplains as advisors on morality, ethics, morale, and issues that impact unit morale. (U.S. Department of Defense, 2021, p.5) As previously discussed, confidentiality enables individuals within an organization to communicate openly and honestly with a chaplain. Chaplains are also uniquely situated within an organization's structure, having access to everyone while simultaneously caring for them. This places the chaplain in an ideal position to observe and provide a distinct view of an institution's culture, one that is not often revealed in employee surveys or analyses by outside consultants. As a keen observer who is also part of the institution's internal community, chaplains can provide effective, trusted, and powerful guidance on approaches to collective repair that effectively address moral injury.

This is not to suggest chaplains are disruptors who work to undermine leadership and cohesion. Instead, as an advisor, the chaplain can serve as a mediator to encourage transparent communication, support healthy relationships, and interpret institutional dynamics from a human perspective. (Profesia Lab, 2025) As keen observers, chaplains provide essential perspectives on decisions, structures, and processes that perpetuate system harm and prevent people from taking the right action. By providing insight from a comprehensive, differentiated view, a chaplain's advice can empower people to transcend barriers due to hierarchical structures that uphold institutional infallibility and work together to rebuild trust and cohesion when moral injury occurs.

Chaplains as coaches on collective repair

The "Bathsheba Syndrome" refers to the biblical story of King David as a case study in U.S. military leadership courses. (Ludwig & Longenecker, 1993) The case highlights the moral and ethical pitfalls leaders encounter and encourages them to seek their own "Nathan," a

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prophetic voice that holds them accountable and provides guidance. However, who is best suited to be a leader's "Nathan" – an external executive coach with limited knowledge of the institution's culture and focused on metrics of institutional success? We believe chaplains are best suited to serve as leaders' "Nathan" – an informed, prophetic voice from within whose priority is the flourishing of the institution and its people, not only the institution's survival alone. Similar to their role as advisors, we see strong potential in chaplains providing focused ethical counsel and coaching executive leaders to enact collective repair.

Ultimately, leaders are the ones who possess the most agency for establishing and changing an institution's culture. (Cote, 2023) Examples, such as Rushton's Conscious Full Spectrum model, utilized in healthcare settings, have proven effective in enacting collective moral repair (Rushton, 2018, p.244). However, leaders, facing a variety of pressures (Marqihealth, 2025), often require support in leading collective change efforts. Chaplains can help leaders understand that prioritizing people's welfare does not conflict with the institution's success; instead, it depends on it. (Wirpsa, et. al., 2024) Chaplains trained in moral injury can coach leaders on strategies to co-create approaches to collective repair, leading to an adaptive culture able to mitigate and respond to moral injury.

Suggestions for Further Development

Greek poet Archilochus wrote, "People do not rise to the level of their expectations, they fall to the level of their training." Thus, we believe that realizing these possibilities for chaplaincy is best achieved through continuing education and training of chaplains on moral injury. Efforts must empower chaplains to apply their existing skills to lead organization-wide collective repair. It must also aid chaplains in educating their institutions, particularly leadership, on moral injury and how their chaplains can help mitigate and address it. We acknowledge this

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may require separate training and education opportunities for institutional leaders, teaching them how to engage with their chaplains to create synergy of effort.

Existing Programs

The Department of Veterans Affairs (U.S.), in conjunction with Vanderbilt University (U.S.), created the Integrated Mental Health Program in 2019. This education program equips chaplains with evidence-based skills to integrate spiritual care with mental health professionals. The program envisions a more holistic, interconnected effort where "professionals and communities that attend to these needs should be coordinated and integrated for optimal care" (MIRECC, 2025). The curriculum includes modules on moral injury and community-based recovery strategies, and affords chaplains an opportunity to earn a professional doctorate degree.

The Moral Injury Certificate Program (MICP) is a 10-week education program offered by the Shay Moral Injury Center, Volunteers of America (U.S.). The course, developed by Dr. Rita Nakashima Brock and other moral injury experts, is "a ten-week online course for spiritual caregivers, chaplains, social workers, clinicians, and educators seeking to integrate moral injury-informed care in their work and communities." (Volunteers of America, 2025) The course includes modules on the use of ritual, peer support, and other approaches to interdisciplinary moral repair.

The strength of both programs lies in their ability to keep chaplains within their context, allowing them to immediately apply their learning in practice and receive feedback from peers across multiple professions. We recommend further development of existing and similar education programs that draw on emerging research and work on moral injury, focusing on

systemic, relational, and structural dynamics that cause institutional moral injury and strategies for leading collective repair.

Conclusion: Why This Matters

Moral injury results in devastating harm to people's physical, psychological, spiritual, and moral well-being. It erodes trust and respect necessary for cohesion in organizational relationships and thus, diminishes an institution's ability to carry out its mission and readiness to adapt to change. There have been leaders and organizations with the courage to address moral transgressions when they occur. However, moral injuries are perpetuated far too often because of the pressures to protect institutional infallibility and subsequent treatment of it as an individual phenomenon. The morally injured have been too fearful to speak, leaders are blinded to what is actually hindering effectiveness, and all are resistant to taking action. In addition to perpetuating systemic harm and preventing a meaningful effort toward collective repair, it ultimately damages the institution's culture and integrity.

Chaplains have always provided crucial care to individuals in the wake of moral injury, aiding recovery. However, transformational possibilities exist in expanding the chaplain's role, utilizing their skills to lead collective repair across the entire organization. As recognized leaders in collective repair, chaplains aid in fusing people across hierarchical structures and competing interests into a cohesive community dedicated to the institution's aims and each other. Chaplains will always remain "good people to talk to" when moral injury occurs. As leaders of collective repair, they will also remind everyone in the institution that it is just as essential to co-create a culture where they care for one another, too.

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