

BOOK REVIEWS

Review of *Moral injury: The Military Chaplain Field Manual*

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Military Chaplaincy Review

Jay Rhodes, *Moral Injury: The Military Chaplain Field Manual* (Holistic Health, 2025). 224 pp. ISBN 979-8-9991790-0-5

Moral Injury: The Military Chaplain Field Manual is part of a growing genre of resources helping military chaplains understand and address moral injury. Other recent releases along the same lines include *Moral Injury: A Handbook for Military Chaplains* (2023), *Moral Injury: Implications for U.S. SOF and Ethical Resiliency* (2023), and the U.S. Air Force's *Moral Injury Playbook* (2025).¹ No doubt these and other products will be refined and replicated in years to come.

What helps Jay Rhodes' work stand out, besides being the work of a single author, is its laser focus on best practices for chaplains. The book is a result of decades of experience as a pastor, psychotherapist, counselor, and chaplain. As the title suggests, it is very much a field manual rather than a handbook, guidebook, playbook, or textbook. When faced with the complexities and pain associated with moral injury, Rhodes contends that a chaplain's best recourse is not to search for a grand unified theory or silver bullet intervention, but to strain to become a more attentive and well-rounded chaplain.

The field manual is organized into eleven chapters. In chapter 1, Rhodes defines moral injury, and in chapters 2 and 3 he considers the unique role military chaplains might play in addressing it. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 talk about assessing moral injury, spiritual care, healing and resilience. Chapters 7 and 8 form the strongest and most practical part of the book, outlining counseling strategies and how to collaborate with mental health providers. These themes are revisited in the concluding chapter, which outlines what

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¹ Harold Koenig, Lindsay Carey and Jennifer Wortham, *Moral Injury: A Handbook for Military Chaplains* (Independently Published, 2023); Marc-Charles Ingerson, John Edgar Caterson, David Wood, and Matthew Kazumi Ikenoyama, *Moral Injury: Implications for U.S. SOF and Ethical Resiliency* (MacDill Air Force Base, FL: Joint Special Operations University Press, 2023); *Moral Injury Playbook* (Washington, DC: Department of the Air Force, 2025). These are relatively recent guides focused on military or chaplaincy. To this list many others could be added, including: Renos Papadopoulos, ed., *Moral Injury and Beyond: Understanding Human Anguish and Healing Traumatic Wounds* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), Robert Emmet Meagher and Douglas Pryor, eds., *War and Moral Injury: A Reader* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), and Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabrielle Lettini, *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury after War* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 2013).

spiritual interventions look like for people experiencing guilt, grief, or anger. Rhodes encourages chaplains to collaborate without confusing roles to achieve better referrals, better networks, and more meaningful interventions based on an identified emotional need. He provides sample prompting questions, rituals, readings from sacred texts, and insights on when and how to make a referral.² Chapters 9 and 10, meanwhile, consider moral injury under the broader rubrics of resiliency and the future of interdisciplinary study.

The manual addresses chaplains in the second person. It finds its most natural audience with chaplains with little or no experience with moral injury, or those in high stress and high stakes environments, so that they gain confidence to face the phenomenon “with strength and kindness.”³ Rhodes takes the tone of a coach, speaking in encouraging terms, often reminding military chaplains of the remarkable privilege of their role in a unit or organization: “you are more than a counselor. You are a keeper of sacred space, a witness to pain, and a minister of truth and hope.”⁴

One limiting factor with this manual, however, is the risk of oversimplification. Rhodes covers so much ground so quickly, while also being concise and direct, that there are occasional opportunities to be misunderstood. Blanket statements such as “chaplains offer complete, unrestricted confidentiality—no exceptions” can only work if the reader knows that Rhodes is presupposing a private counseling session, and referring to the content of the communication—that there is not certain exceptional information (about criminal acts, national security or abusive situations) that a chaplain still has a duty to report.⁵ And even if the reader correctly interprets that, there is still the case of a national guard chaplain who is not on Title 10 orders and so may in fact be a mandatory reporter.

Another example of this oversimplification is the decades-long issue of moral injury’s definition. Rhodes’ working definition of moral injury is stated but not explained with a footnote or appendix. With only this manual, one might come away with the impression that moral injury’s essence and rate of occurrence are facts most people already agree upon. Issues of conceptual drift, the clinical approach versus many proposed alternatives, and who ought to be at the center of the moral injury discussion, simply are not mentioned.

² Rhodes, *Moral Injury*, 134-141, 182-190.

³ Rhodes, *Moral Injury*, 6.

⁴ Rhodes, *Moral Injury*, 194.

⁵ Rhodes, *Moral Injury*, 132. Italics in original quote. Cf. Rhodes, *Moral Injury*, 37, 42, 129.

Some readers will need better preparation if they ever encounter a mental health professional, counselor, commander, or even fellow chaplain with opposing views.⁶

Not that Rhodes' definition of moral injury is itself a problem. On the contrary, it is broadly relevant to what most military chaplains are likely to encounter in their day to day work: "the deep emotional or spiritual suffering that results from actions, or the lack of action, which violates a person's core values and sense of right and wrong."⁷ Readers who are familiar with the ongoing terminological tug of war may have their quibbles, but they will likely also recognize the intentionality behind Rhodes' definition. It contains elements of both a betrayal-based and transgression-based model, but also adds a qualifier, spiritual. It represents one way to view moral injury as a phenomenon that chaplains have always sought to address through their ministry.

In other instances, Rhodes raises some questions but only hints at answers; readers will have to decide for themselves if he should have said more. Given that moral injury is not to be confused with PTSD, is it distinguishable from depression or grief? Given that there are many assessments, is there one that stands out as particularly helpful? How prevalent is moral injury, and is there something about the era of the Global War on Terror that puts service members at higher risk for moral injury? Near the end of the manual, Rhodes states that "moral injury is becoming more common."⁸ Since he has already made the case early on that moral injury is nothing new in U.S. military history, it is unclear whether he means moral injury is becoming more prevalent or simply more recognized.⁹

Rhodes seems less interested in chiming in on debates that easily become esoteric, and much more interested in using the interdisciplinary discussions of moral injury as an opportunity to raise the baseline competency of chaplains—a goal that is likely to be achieved if this manual gains a wide readership. On nearly every page, he enriches a chaplain's vocabulary and provides categories for thought. He recommends approaches that comport with a wide variety of faith traditions and personal convictions, in line with the role of a chaplain to provide support in a pluralistic setting. He encourages chaplains to study but does not insist that they need separate

⁶ For one example of how definitions can alter how moral injury is perceived or measured in military settings, see Tim Hoyt, "Moral Injury: Wrestling with Definitions and Conceptual Drift," *Aether* vol. 2, no. 3 (Fall 2023): 60-70.

⁷ Rhodes, *Moral Injury*, 8, 208.

⁸ Rhodes, *Moral Injury*, 173.

⁹ Rhodes, *Moral Injury*, 10.

specialized training to start being active listeners. Most crucially, he takes care to explain that the goal of any ritual or intervention is that it becomes owned by the servicemember, it is “not just something they participate in.”¹⁰

Those looking to compare competing models of moral injury, or to understand moral injury as a cultural phenomenon in a civil-military divide and growing interdisciplinary discourse, will need further context beyond this field manual. But Rhodes’s contribution should still prove profitable for a diverse crowd who want to identify and encourage best practices. It will be useful to senior chaplains or course instructors, and especially relevant to entry-level chaplains. Rhodes has given military chaplains, and the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps in particular, a rare and thoughtful gift.

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¹⁰ Rhodes, *Moral Injury*, 92.