

## Integration of the Spiritual Component into Psychotherapeutic Assistance to Combatants

Mykola Lahodych  <sup>1</sup>\*

<sup>1</sup> Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University (Ukraine). Associate Professor at the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Studies, PhD in Theology, PhD in History, Associate Professor.

\* **Corresponding Author**, e-mail: [m.lahodych@chnu.edu.ua](mailto:m.lahodych@chnu.edu.ua)

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### ABSTRACT

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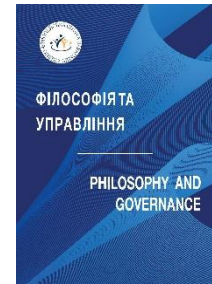
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While the war continues in Ukraine, issues related to effective methods of psychotherapeutic assistance to combatants are becoming increasingly relevant and practical. In addition to medical aids, art therapy, physical rehabilitation methods, etc., attention is also being paid to the spiritual components of such assistance. In particular, we are talking about the religious factor as one of the elements of psychological support for veterans. With the help of spiritual and religious formats of interaction, it is possible to work more deeply with existential experiences, take into account the moral and ethical aspects of psycho-emotional traumas and consider ways to overcome the consequences of war in each specific case. The purpose of the article is to study the possibilities of spiritual and religious factors for providing psychotherapeutic assistance to veterans as a component of their support and adaptation to the realities of life. The study showed that spiritual and religious assistance is effective when psychological, theological and social approaches interact. In this case, support from the state and international organizations is important. Among the features of the Ukrainian combat experience, the defensive nature of the war on its own territory, the destructive influence of enemy IPSOs, as well as the change or destruction of worldview and historical and cultural landmarks, are highlighted. Within the framework of rehabilitation, spirituality is considered as a kind of adaptation mechanism and a source of emotional stability. An important role in the provision of psychotherapeutic assistance belongs to the consolidated cooperation of psychologists with military chaplains, in particular through educational activities. It is separately emphasized that the combination of secular and religious aspects forms an effective integrated model of assistance that contributes to the improvement of a person's mental health. The conclusions emphasize that the formation of an appropriate legislative framework, the creation and development of appropriate institutions, as well as solving the problems of psychotherapeutic assistance to participants in hostilities at the state level and international support, contribute to the involvement of spiritual and religious methods for the successful reintegration of people into peaceful life. It is emphasized that spirituality is an important element in restoring the internal emotional integrity of combatants, their mental well-being, and successful integration into civilian life. The military chaplain acts as a significant person in the rehabilitation process, helping to move from psycho-emotional trauma to finding new meanings in life.




### KEYWORDS

health, healing, Bible, Church, religion, spirituality, crisis, chaplain.



## Інтеграція духовного компоненту в психотерапевтичну допомогу учасникам бойових дій

Микола М. Лагодич  1

<sup>1</sup> Чернівецький національний університет імені Юрія Федьковича (Україна). Доцент кафедри філософії та культурології, канд. наук з богослов'я, канд. іст. наук, доцент.

\* Автор-кореспондент, e-mail: [m.lahodych@chnu.edu.ua](mailto:m.lahodych@chnu.edu.ua)

### СТАТТЯ

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Допоки в Україні триває війна, все більшої наукової актуальності та практичного значення набувають питання, пов'язані з ефективними методиками психотерапевтичної допомоги учасникам бойових дій. Окрім медикаментозних засобів, арттерапії, фізичних методів реабілітації тощо, звертають увагу й на духовні компоненти такої допомоги. Зокрема, йдеться про релігійний чинник як один з елементів психологічної підтримки ветеранів та ветеранок. За допомогою духовних та релігійних форматів взаємодії можна глибше працювати з екзистенційними переживаннями, враховувати морально-етичні аспекти психоемоційних травм і розглядати шляхи для подолання наслідків війни у кожному конкретному випадку. Мета статті полягає у вивченні можливостей духовних та релігійних чинників для надання психотерапевтичної допомоги ветеранам як складової їхньої підтримки та адаптації до реалій життя. Дослідження показало, що духовно-релігійна допомога є ефективною при взаємодії психологічного, теологічного та соціального підходів. При цьому важливою є підтримка держави й міжнародних організацій. Серед особливостей українського бойового досвіду виділено оборонний характер війни на власній території, деструктивний вплив ворожих ІПСО, а також зміну чи руйнування світоглядних та історико-культурних орієнтирів. У рамках реабілітації духовність розглядається як своєрідний механізм адаптації та джерело емоційної стійкості. Важлива роль у наданні психотерапевтичної допомоги належить консолідованій співпраці психологів із військовими капеланами, зокрема, й через освітні заходи. Окремо акцентовано, що поєднання світських і релігійних аспектів формує ефективну інтегровану модель допомоги, яка сприяє поліпшенню ментального здоров'я людини. У висновках підкреслено, що формування відповідної законодавчої бази, створення та розвиток відповідних інституцій, а також вирішення проблем психотерапевтичної допомоги учасникам бойових дій на рівні держави та міжнародної підтримки, сприяють залученню духовно-релігійних методів для успішної реінтеграції людей у мирне життя. Наголошено, що духовність є важливим елементом відновлення внутрішньої емоційної цілісності учасників бойових дій, їхнього ментального добробуту та успішної інтеграції у цивільне життя. Військовий капелан виступає значущою персоною у реабілітаційному процесі, допомагаючи перейти від психоемоційної травми до пошуку нових сенсів життя.



### КЛЮЧОВІ СЛОВА

здоров'я, зцілення, Біблія, Церква, релігія, духовність, криза, капелан.

## 1. Introduction

Restoring the mental health of combatants is an extremely difficult task, which is not limited exclusively to the activities of a psychologist or psychotherapist. To achieve a lasting result, an integrated approach is needed. Without the implementation of systemic measures, the process of reintegration of a person who has been exposed to military trials can stretch for an indefinite period [25, p. 88]. The full healing of a person who was a participant in hostilities, risked his life and health every day, saw death and lost loved ones, requires not only time and significant resources, but also an understanding of the importance of religion and spirituality for such recovery, overcoming the crisis and further full-blooded life. For a combatant, war is not only a physical threat or psychological stress.

## 2. Literature Review

Secular and religious strategies of psychological well-being are singled out and analyzed by V. Sirko [17]. The researcher considers "(...) strategies of involvement in a religious organization, active interaction with members of religious communities (...)" [17, p. 103]. V. Zuikov [31] focused on the psychological skills and abilities of chaplains and clergymen involved in the comprehensive support and realization of veterans of the War of Ukraine for Independence. In his article, the scientist focused special attention on chaplains as the primary link of such assistance [31]. The regional specifics of educational, medical and military chaplaincy of the UGCC in wartime were studied by A. Zhuk and O. Yegreshiy [28]. O. Tashkinova and V. Oliarnyk [18] studied the role of military chaplains in the social support of the military and their families.

Chaplains, as an important component of the spiritual life of military personnel, have become the subject of scientific attention for Yu. Rusnak [15]. The formation of the domestic model of military chaplaincy is devoted to the article by L. Nepipenko [12]. The experience of military chaplains of different countries, primarily NATO, was studied by O. Tereshchuk [19]. Also important is the article by M. Drapohuz [5], who considered the challenges faced by military chaplains and proposed ways to solve them as an active chaplain of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Issues related to the history of the formation of military chaplaincy in Ukraine, the specifics of its development, and the role for military personnel, especially in wartime, are covered in the publications of C. Zdioruk [27], O. Sagan and I. Harat [16], I. Pylypiv and R. Deliatynskiy [14], M. Dolganova and I. Chobit [4].

N. Zhyhaylo and M. Tsymbaliuk [30] revealed the importance of the spiritual factor for the rehabilitation of military personnel after demobilization. N. Prorok et al. [13] approached the consideration of religiosity as "(...) psychological adaptation mechanism that supports people in crises (...)" [13, p. 129]. It is also important to pay attention to the dissertation research of A. Makovsky [8], which deals with pastoral activity in the psychological support of border guards. The article by B. Blahyi [2] deals with the interaction of psychological support, spiritual support and interfaith dialogue in the face of aggression. In the article by N. Zhyhaylo and N. Kostruba [29], the "Model of Involvement of Military Chaplaincy in the System of Psychological Support of Military Personnel" is proposed and analyzed.

## 3. Problem Statement

During the war, a significant number of people face mental trauma, which can later transform into more serious mental disorders or psychosomatic illnesses. This is especially true for combatants. In this context, the importance of military chaplains, priests and pastors of various denominations is growing significantly. They have become an important link in providing primary crisis care to both military personnel and veterans who are overcoming the difficult process of returning to civilian life [31, p. 414]. It is spiritual care that becomes the bridge that helps veterans overcome the existential crisis and find support for themselves.

## 4. Methods and Materials

The source base for writing our article was the regulatory legal acts of Ukraine, materials from the websites of religious denominations and organizations, interviews with clergy and the military, as well

as scientific publications related to the topic of the study. In addition, we turned to news sites where you can get important factual and analytical information. The comparative approach in the course of the study made it possible to identify the peculiar features of the War of Ukraine for Independence. Thanks to the axiological approach, the role and capabilities of military chaplains in the process of psychotherapeutic support of war veterans were studied. With the help of the hermeneutic method and the processing of the content of the relevant sites, we were able to assess the directions and problems and achievements in working with traumatic experiences. Using the case method, we considered specific examples of integrating spiritual and religious components into psychotherapeutic practices aimed at helping participants in hostilities in Ukraine, as well as studied the experience of training military chaplains to fulfill such a spiritual mission.

## **5. Results and Discussion**

At the end of 2021, the Law "On the Military Chaplaincy Service" came into force in Ukraine. The question of the need for such a structure in Ukraine arose in the early 1990s. participate in the rehabilitation of personnel in need of psychological assistance (...)" [26].

Since 1993, on the initiative of a group of Christian officers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, an association of Christian military personnel has been operating. Over time, its activities expanded and the organization was called "All-Ukrainian Interconfessional Christian-Military Religious Brotherhood". The Brotherhood is a unique religious organization formed within the framework of the provisions of the Law of Ukraine "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations" on the initiative of the five largest Ukrainian churches in 2000, a voluntary association of believing military personnel and law enforcement officers, including persons who are in reserve or retired. Representatives of the civilian population and clergy who have expressed a desire to participate in the activities of its branches can also join the ranks of the Brotherhood. The basis of cooperation is the principle of interfaith cooperation. The activities of the Brotherhood are primarily aimed at integrating the moral and spiritual values of traditional Ukrainian Christian churches with the intellectual and organizational resources of current and former military personnel. This is carried out to ensure the constitutional right of military personnel to freedom of conscience, promote their spiritual development, maintain psycho-emotional balance, educate young people and provide spiritual care. The fundamental basis of the Brotherhood's activities is Christian values, as well as national and military-patriotic traditions of the Ukrainian people. The brotherhood includes military personnel of various Christian denominations, including commanders, educators, engineers, lawyers, journalists and former soldiers in reserve [1].

The functioning of military-religious services in many countries of the world, as well as the nature of their tasks, indicates that they not only provide satisfaction of religious needs. These services are integrated into the system of psychological influence on personnel, regardless of the worldview beliefs of each serviceman. Religious education is an integral part of the combat and moral-psychological training of the military and is aimed at fulfilling its main task, that is, maintaining a high level of spiritual and patriotic mood and combat readiness of troops [9, p. 174].

As noted by C. Zdioruk [27], "military priests perform a double function – they provide military personnel with the implementation of their religious needs, as well as advise commanders on the moral and psychological state of troops. Modern military specialists consider religious education among personnel as one of the forms of mitigation of psychological tension associated with the functioning of the complex army system "serviceman-military-technical complex" [27, pp. 2–3]. The founder of the humanistic school of psychology, A. Maslow, in his hierarchy of human needs, singled out the need for security and protection as one of the basic components of human life. In the same context, the system of religious beliefs helps the human being to order his existence and interaction with the environment, uniting them into a wholeness filled with meaning. This, in turn, gives a sense of security. The representative of humanistic psychoanalysis, E. Fromm, also noted that religion often serves people as a basic orientation that gives their lives meaning [9, p. 174].

It should be emphasized that, firstly, hostilities are taking place in our native land. Secondly, hostilities take place in any climatic and weather conditions, without a break for lunch or vacation. Thirdly, a long and indefinite stay in the war zone, without clear and standardized rotations. Fourthly, an incredibly large number of traumatic brain injuries caused by blast waves and unprecedented artillery shelling is in the history of almost all combatants [3, pp. 11–12]. Sixthly, the "drone war", which gives rise to a new understanding of the course of the war and the advantages of certain means of

destruction in it [32]. Fifth, the enemy is the nearest neighboring country and its population, which for a long time were considered by many as a “fraternal people” that are culturally and mentally close. Sixth, combatants may have relatives and loved ones who are now on the other side, both physically and mentally. In addition, there may be relatives who are in the occupied territories, and their fate is not always known. Seventhly, an active and powerful IPSO on the part of the Russian Federation, which affects the moral and psychological state of veterans [3, pp. 11–12].

From the standpoint of religious ethics and spiritual principles, the chaplain is able to provide reasoned answers that, at the same time, have a positive effect on the psychological state of the military. Such support is of particular importance in situations where a person loses faith and hope under the pressure of enemy forces or an intense information attack. In such circumstances, the spiritual values of the religious worldview act as a powerful source of inspiration, helping to strengthen the spirit and restore faith in the possibility of success and contribute to the healing [7, p. 52]. As Father Rostyslav Vysochan noted in his interview:

“In fact, as a military chaplain, I have very often seen people who do not believe in God in war. But a serviceman who is in combat conditions is influenced by a lot of different stress factors, and this allows him to think about deep things. And these questions that touch on the supernatural, they somehow push a person to search for this truth. And accordingly, we can say that, probably, a certain percentage in the direction of an increase in believers is happening, but this is not a statement one hundred percent that war is some kind of place where people begin to believe in God en masse” [24].

His words are complemented by Father Konstantin Kholodov:

“I will continue Father Rostyslav’s thought: war is a place, a time when everything that is in a person either blossoms or rots. If a person has some good beginnings that were sown by parents, upbringing, teachers, and priests, then they will give their growth (if a person wants it, if not, then it will all perish). For the most part, when a person sees death in front of him, he has two options – either to run away from it or not to notice it. And now the Gospel teaches us not to notice death, we are taught by the Lord, who says, “Do not be afraid,” who says, “I am with you, who yourself has overcome death. And in fact, the serviceman then remembers death not as the end of his life, but as a part of his life, and this, in fact, is why faith deepens. The task of the chaplain is to take care not only of believers, but of everyone, to help everyone, to serve everyone” [27].

It is necessary to dwell more substantively on the program “Healing the Wounds of War”. It was approved by a resolution of the Synod of Bishops of the UGCC (Rome, September 3–13, 2023). The program is the result of joint work of the UGCC Commission on Pastoral Care together with specialists from the UCU Institute of Mental Health. Already on September 18, 2023, a course for pastors began for the clergy of the UGCC at the Patriarchal House (Lviv), which covered several areas: theology, pastoral work and mental health. Also, in the future, a course for the wives of clergy and monastics. Funding for the course was provided with the support of the Canadian Embassy and the Canadian Foundation for Local Initiatives. The course was joined mainly by pastors from the East and South of Ukraine. It is important that, in addition to teaching, priests and theologians have the opportunity to share their experiences related to the war. As the course teacher Oleh Romanchuk noted, “When a person says at confession that he has survived rape or has signs of PTSD after the war, he may not know what is happening to him. But the priest can help her understand this with the hope that there is a way of healing, to guide and to be there. Even though professional assistance is a very important component, pastoral support is no less a source of support. Therefore, it is very important to provide pastoral support with sensitivity and wisdom” [21].

On May 26, 2025, in Kyiv, at the residence of His Beatitude Sviatoslav, a meeting was held with R. Dallaire, a Canadian writer, former senator and retired general, who commanded the UN peacekeeping contingent in Rwanda during 1993–1994. R. Dallaire arrived together with his wife M. — K. Michaud. The meeting was also attended by R. van Vooren, Dutch human rights activist, head of the Federation of the Global Initiative in Psychiatry and professor at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas. General R. Dallaire presented to the Head of the UGCC initiatives aimed at studying mental health needs in Ukraine, in particular among the families of military personnel and veterans. During the meeting, he shared his experience in reforming the mental health support system among veterans of the Canadian Armed Forces during his leadership of the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs. The main goal of this initiative is a thorough study of the challenges faced by the mental health of Ukrainians as a result of Russia’s continued aggression. General R. Dallaire, together with representatives of public organizations and the Institute of Psychiatry of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, is working to involve the

governments of Canada, Sweden and the Netherlands in the implementation of a long-term mental health support program for military and veteran families in Ukraine. The Head of the UGCC emphasized that caring for the mental health of Ukrainians has been one of the main priorities of the pastoral activity of the UGCC, since the Revolution of Dignity. He acquainted the audience with the key tasks of the UGCC clergy training program entitled "Healing the Wounds of War". They also discussed the initiatives of the Department of Military Chaplaincy and other commissions of the Patriarchal Curia aimed at supporting the mental and spiritual health of the Ukrainian nation. Particular attention is paid to the families of servicemen, the dead and missing, as well as the wounded and released from captivity [23].

The program "Healing the Wounds of War" is extremely important because, as noted by the psychotherapist and teacher of the course, Sister Maria Kinas, none of the priests who studied in seminaries had the opportunity to master the discipline of pastoral support during the war. Now this problem has become even more relevant, because we had to face some confusion, since the clergy was not properly prepared for such challenges. Within the framework of the program, the focus on addressing mental health issues provides a deeper understanding of the psychological trauma caused by war. An important component is the presentation of certain practical methods that priests can use in their pastoral work [22]. Thus, by combining knowledge of the Bible and psychology, a clergyman has the opportunity to support combatants for their spiritual healing and adaptation to current realities. However, it is important to note that a clergyman should not replace a psychologist, but his awareness of the processes of the human psyche will allow him to provide support and assistance more effectively.

Let us also recall the OCU documentary project "I am a chaplain". The project participants share their thoughts on victory, the one that is achieved not only on the battlefield, but also in the soul of a person who survived, preserved faith and humanity. The project aims not only to reveal the figures of chaplains, but also to emphasize that the spiritual struggle is as significant as the military. After all, victory is born in the belief that good is stronger than evil [11]. In addition, on May 21–22, 2025, the First Military Forum of OCU Chaplains was held in the assembly hall of the Kyiv Orthodox Theological Academy. Before the start of the event, a solemn prayer service for victory and peace in Ukraine was held, led by His Beatitude Metropolitan Epiphanius. The forum was attended by the hierarchs of the OCU, representatives of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, intelligence, the Ministry of Defense, the National Guard of Ukraine, the State Border Guard Service, foreign chaplains, as well as more than a hundred military chaplains of the Church. At the beginning of the meeting, the Primate addressed the audience with a pastoral speech. He emphasized that without our Armed Forces, Ukraine would no longer exist, and without chaplains, it would be difficult to imagine a new Ukrainian army. Awards were also presented to chaplains who arrived from Estonia and Latvia. At the invitation of the head of the Synodal Administration of the Military Clergy, Metropolitan John of Cherkasy and Chyhyryn, the rector of the Academy, Protopresbyter Yaroslav Romanchuk, took part in the forum. In his welcoming speech, he emphasized the importance of systematic training of chaplains and the prospects for the further development of this ministry. He noted that such activities are not only a source of spiritual support for the defenders of the Fatherland, but also a symbol of the real presence of the Church next to those who defend peace and truth every day [6].

We also recall the forum of military chaplains "Being Near". It was organized in February 2026 by the Department of Culture and Tourism of the Ternopil Regional Military Administration. During the forum, the issue of an individual approach to each serviceman in the war zone, the importance of spiritual support for the wounded in medical institutions, assistance to the families of the dead, as well as work with veterans after their demobilization, was considered. The participants of the event exchanged professional experience and analyzed current challenges that they have to face in their daily activities [20].

Military medical institutions have the position of military chaplains in their staffing lists. The activities of military chaplains are aimed at forming trusting and supportive relationships with wounded servicemen. At the same time, one should be prepared for possible manifestations of depressive and aggressive behavior, other complex emotions, which are a natural reaction of people to extremely traumatic events. It is important to consider that although religion often serves as a spiritual foundation for many soldiers, not all soldiers are religious, and even among believers, religion does not always occupy a central place in their worldview. Thus, the role of the chaplain includes the ability to focus on those aspects of the warrior's personal beliefs that he himself considers the most important. It can be religion, spirituality, nature, scientific research or any other significant life values [10, p. 404]. The task

of the chaplain is to help a person understand his own priorities and invent an internal resource to maintain his moral and psychological state.

It is worth noting that among military chaplains, in addition to Christians, there are Muslim chaplains and Jewish chaplains. Taking into account confessional diversity, as well as the presence of atheists and agnostics among military personnel, is necessary for the formation of truly balanced and democratic approaches to psychotherapeutic support for combatants.

## 6. Conclusions

In accordance with the Law of Ukraine “On the Military Chaplaincy Service”, as well as thanks to the activities of religious organizations, state and international institutions, a system of constructive cooperation between the state and religious communities has been formed in Ukraine. The military chaplain has become a full-fledged part of the Resistance Forces of Ukraine, acting not only as a person who meets religious needs but also as someone who provides primary crisis care and long-term spiritual support for combatants.

The psycho-emotional trauma experienced by combatants is a complex phenomenon that goes beyond only clinical manifestations, encompassing deep existential experiences. A person who has experienced such an experience faces difficult changes in the inner world. Therefore, healing cannot be limited to medical or psychological approaches; it also includes a spiritual component that contributes to the restoration of a holistic worldview and overcoming personal crises. At the same time, it is not necessary to be a religious or religious person.

The peculiarities of Ukraine’s War of Independence, including hostilities in the native land, the collapse of the myth of the “fraternal people” and the impact of enemy information and psychological operations, make the importance of the spiritual dimension even more significant. In situations where key social and family ties are being destroyed, religious faith and biblical meanings can serve as guidelines that restore a person’s sense of security and control over their lives. Next, it is important to integrate the spiritual component through the creation of joint protocols for collaboration between psychotherapists and military chaplains. This approach will ensure the integrity of the healing process, which is critical for the successful adaptation of veterans to civilian life.

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