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Ethical Conflicts of Religious Practices in the Army

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Abstract

Religious practices in the Army are creating an ethical dilemma for our Soldiers. Both the Oath of Enlistment and the practices of senior officials demonstrate an inability to separate church and state. Therefore, the U.S. Army should discontinue the use of sectarian religious practice in military ceremonies and events. Those who wish can practice their chosen religion off duty as a personal matter. Military chaplains' primary function is not to provide the command with religion. On the contrary, they have other obligations to the command, while religious services are not the commands priority. Until we separate the Army and religious practices in accordance with the constitution, we will continue to create ethical dilemmas for our Soldiers.

Ethical Conflicts of Religious Practices in the Army

The Army is creating ethical conflicts for our Soldiers due to the diverse number of religions and religious practice conflicts in the Army and Chaplains policies. Currently the U.S. Military recognizes numerous religions. However, in most organizational and military functions the majority of religions referenced is limited to two or three and totally disregards others. This disregard for the other religions and Army policy is not only creating an ethical dilemma for our Soldiers but it is a disingenuous disregard for their beliefs and rights. We must consider separating the formal practice of religion in Army functions and ceremonies, with the exception of memorial services, and continue to support religion as a personal and private practice.

Historically the church and state have embraced the conduct of warfare in the name of the religion of each country or sect, because religion was a significant part of the culture. There are many examples of historical religious wars. The three primary wars were the French Wars of Religion, the Crusades, and the Reconquista. Because some cultures have not tolerated the practice of other religions, some people within the culture felt slighted within society and treated as outcasts. Others felt like criminals left to practice their religion in secret. This practice still exists today for many cultures around the world. If most religions only believed in their one true god or deity, then how can they support the religious freedom of others? This cultural religious orthodoxy led to many of the historic clashes. While most countries separate religion from government and their legal system, some cultures believe that their religion is the law. In Sudan, a foreign teacher allowed her class of Sudanese children to name a teddy bear Muhammad, not realizing it might offend Muslims since he is “the prophet”, and spent 15 days in jail and then deported. There were outcries in the country that she committed blasphemy with some people

calling for her to receive the penalty of death (CNN, 2007). Clearly, the judicial system and practice of religion are not separate but punishable under the law in many cultures.

The Army tolerates freedom of religion if it is an officially recognized religion. DoD policy (1998) noted that commanders should approve requests for accommodations of religious practices as long as these practices do not adversely affect the unit in terms of readiness or standards. In the Army, there are installation supported prayer breakfasts that Soldiers may participate in during the duty day. Many commands participate and allow their Soldiers to attend these functions. Still, most of these prayer breakfasts are limited in the scope of religions covered in nature. Some commands have made it mandatory for key personnel by not enforcing the purchase of breakfast or changing the name of the function in order to support the Chaplains.

There are numerous other examples of religious conflicts in military functions. In the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy during a Family Readiness Group (FRG) meeting, the head of the FRG asked the members to bow their head and pray with him at the conclusion of a meeting. This created discomfort for some members of the FRG and even insulted others because they mixed a formal meeting with the religious beliefs of the key members. The FRG is the commander's program and should not involve religious practices or personal beliefs. Disagreement within many organizations also stems from Halloween parties which some call the fall celebrations just because of the stigmatism associated with the name in many religious organizations. To celebrate these occasions the organization or Soldiers buy and donate candy to give out at the party. Several members of the local community and organizations voiced their opposition to the unit supporting these functions and claim it glorifies Halloween, which many Christians believe as Hallows eve, or all Saints day, representing a paginistic ritual in celebration of satanistic practices. The annual Christmas parties that most organizations now

call holiday celebrations in order not to offend other religious beliefs have also changed over the years, yet they still alienate many Soldiers of different religions. Regardless of the name change the majority are still Christmas parties, they have Santa Clause who hands out gifts, and Christmas trees as well as being very limited in scope of the celebration. Every one of these events usually has an invocation or speech of some kind that involves the Chaplain or Soldier delivering a short prayer. When these prayers specifically say, “in Jesus Christ or Jesus’ name we pray”, they are no longer non-denominational.

Despite what many people believe to the contrary, there are distinct religious issues surrounding these events, which bring conflict for some family members or Soldiers who support these functions. Many of the Soldiers of different faiths would simply come to eat the food and then leave. They would “make an appearance” in order to keep the chain of command off their back. While some may believe these individuals or families simply do not like to stay very long. There are Soldiers who express their concerns privately.

AR 165-1 Chaplain Activities in the United States Army (2005) under the Command Master Religious Plan outlines commanders’ responsibilities and directs that they support the religious practice of all Soldiers. Within this regulation, participation of Army personnel in religious activities is voluntary. However, commanders can require military personnel to render logistical support for activities such as a prayer breakfast or tree lighting ceremony involuntary even if it is a different religion than that of those tasked for support. The mere support of other religious activities could cause a serious dilemma for a Soldier of the Muslim faith to provide support for a Jewish service, or someone of the Christian faith to provide support for some recognized Pagan religion. The Chaplain’s duties are not solely to provide religious services. One of their responsibilities is to defend the religious rights of all Soldiers. AR 165-1 discusses

that Chaplains, are an instrument of the U.S. Government and their duties include protecting the religious rights of Soldiers. While trying to avoid the appearance of any organization of religion. (Chief of Chaplains, 2005). Chaplains protect Soldiers rights yet Soldiers are required to provide support for other religious activities despite their religious preference, even if they voice a concern, which the command does not have to honor. Chaplains are not required to offer prayer in ceremonies if doing so would be in variance with the tenets or practices of their faith group. If these are not religious ceremonies then why do chaplains have the right to refuse if it does not represent their faith group and Soldiers do not? Supporting these activities should be the same for all military personnel. Additionally, what other purpose does an invocation, reading, prayer, or benediction have other than to perform one's religious faith represented at a ceremony? The speaker asks God to bless the person, people or organization.

We also have laws protecting our religious freedoms. These laws and regulations again conflict with what is going on in the Army and bring to light several differences. The Presidential Oath includes the words, "I do solemnly swear (or affirm)" (The Library of Congress, 2001, P.1). In that oath there is no reference to God or the word God in any part of the oath. Article VI of the Constitution discusses oaths of office by executive and judicial officers and has a segment that states, "shall be bound by Oath or Affirmation, to support this Constitution; but no religious test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust" (National Archives and Record Administration, 2006, p. 1). This is contradiction to the oath of enlistment, which is unusual considering the President of the United States is the Commander and Chief of the Armed Forces. Federal law requires Soldier to take the oath of enlistment. Under this oath, there is one distinction different from the Oath the president takes as well as our Legislatures and judicial officers. Both officials swear or affirm what has changed in

that the enlistment oath is the last words. Enlisted Soldiers say, “So help me God” despite the fact that Article VI of the constitution states there will be no religious test. These words did not appear in the original 1789 enlistment oath and changed by amendment to Title 10 in 1962.

There is a conflict and a direct hypocrisy in the last phrase Soldiers take in the oath of enlistment. Soldiers use the words swear to defend the constitution “so help me God” while the presidential oath has the words “solemnly swear” with no reference to God or anyone else. This alone opens many questions to interpretation and reasoning as to why they are different and why the enlisted oath was changed.

Based on DoD Directive 1300.17 there are obvious tensions due to religious beliefs. Policies established by the military concerning these issues include: “When requests for accommodation are not in the best interest of the unit and continued tension between the unit's requirements and the individual's religious beliefs is apparent, administrative actions should be considered. Nothing in this Directive precludes action under the Uniform Code of Military Justice in appropriate circumstances” (Taft, 2003 p. 5). Administrative actions such as separation, reassignment, or UCMJ for a religious stance would indeed bring many ethical issues into the decision the command would have to make concerning a Soldier. Soldiers expressing their religious beliefs do cause conflicts. Expressing those beliefs in public caused a public outcry and international incident when General Boykin (2003) stated, “We in the army of God, in the house of God, kingdom of God have been raised for such a time as this” (para.8). General Boykin (2003) also said of President Bush, “He's in the White House because God put him there” (para.9). It is hard for a person of strict religious beliefs to separate their religious convictions from their military duties. How can one keep their religious view separate from military duties if they are bound to them based on their religious convictions? This is and will be an ongoing

problem until we can separate the practice of religion in the military as we have done with public schools and public offices. Still it is hard for even public officials to remain separate. In November 2007, the Governor of Georgia prayed for rain in front of the capitol building stating that – God was the only one who could stop the drought despite the protest of holding such a religious observance at the capitol building by the Governor himself (The Associated Press, 2007).

The more often religions are recognized and not acknowledged in the military during professional and administrative functions, the more the Army will continue to cause conflicts for our Soldiers. Like other Army policies, we must consider changing the Army's traditions to meet the changing world. Separating religious practices in accordance with the constitution from military functions and ceremonies will ensure we keep religion primarily as a personal practice. If we cannot accomplish this, we will continue to create ethical conflicts for our Soldiers as well as dividedness and preference among the very religions we claim to embrace.

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