

Religious Faith the New “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell?” By Linwood Bragan

There are a number of scandals currently plaguing Washington DC; unfortunately, that doesn’t seem all that unusual. One that doesn’t seem to be getting much attention arises out of, perhaps, the most respected institution in America – the United States military – and it goes right to the core of religious liberty.

Media headlines have caused some worshippers to fear fellow adherents in uniform might be purged from the military. In addressing these speculations let’s look beyond the headlines and some confusing statements by the military to get a layout of the policy, a particularly nasty antagonist, some history, and then throw in a little irony to provoke some needed questions.

THE POLICY IN QUESTION

At issue is a concern that service members, including military chaplains, are being banned from sharing their religious faith with other service members. Recently, US military policy was quoted by Todd Starnes on the FOX News website, stating, “Religious proselytization is not permitted within the Department of Defense”. He then added, “... Court Martials and nonjudicial punishments are decided on a case-by-case basis.”

Starnes’ quote created confusion as to whether those in the military could openly talk about their faith. When coupled with the comments of Mikey Weinstein, President of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation (MRFF) it will become apparent how the tempest grew. But before we get to the fun of that food fight, let’s clear up the policy conflict.

Starnes quotes were accurate. However, they were a combination of two disjointed sentences that created the wrong impression. The Defense Department (DOD) sought to clarify the situation and issued a follow up statement that said:

Service members can share their faith (evangelize), but must not force unwanted, intrusive attempts to convert others of any faith or no faith to one’s beliefs (proselytization).

This statement, while intended to add clarity, breeds a little confusion of its own. Dictionary definitions of the words evangelize and proselytize shows them to be synonyms. That being the case, obviously a problem occurs when one synonym is viewed to be good and the other bad when used in the same sentence.

THE ANTAGONIST

What really lit the fuse to this blowup were the words of Mikey Weinstein. On April 23 Weinstein met with DOD officials to consult with them regarding the military’s policies on religious freedom. A week later, in a Huffington Post column, he referred to evangelical Christians as, “monsters of human degradation, marginalization, humiliation and tyranny.”

That was not a solitary rant by Mr. Weinstein. In an interview with FOX News, he described proselytizing as, “...a version of being spiritually raped and you are being spiritually raped by fundamentalist Christian religious predators.” On other occasions he accused members of the military who evangelize as being “guilty of sedition and treason and should be punished by the hundreds, if necessary.” And, in speaking to the Washington Post, he described evangelization as a “national security threat”.

Certainly Weinstein is no charmer. And judging by his rhetoric, perhaps he should consider renaming his nonprofit the Military Freedom “FROM” Religion Foundation.

THE HISTORY

The tension is certainly not all attributable to a FOXNews article, nor a hysterical atheist “promoting religious freedom”. In 2011, the Army changed visiting guidelines at Walter Reed Medical Center to state: “No religious items (i.e. Bibles, reading materials and/or fax) are allowed to be given away or used during a visit.” Because of public outcry, the Army quickly rescinded the guideline modification.

In March of this year a story began to crop up regarding a military PowerPoint being circulated that identified Evangelical Christianity and Roman Catholics as being “extremist”, like al Qaeda. As it turned out, the story was true;

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Faith: Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell? 1



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however it was not sanctioned by the DOD but was a training brief developed and promoted by a Pennsylvania Army Reserve Equal Opportunity unit. The Department of the Army has said it does not condone the training and it was an isolated event. Even though isolated, it fits the current storyline concerning evangelism.

By the end of April, another story broke that caused concern among Christians that they were being targeted by the military. Several major media outlets reported that the largest evangelical denomination in America, the Southern Baptist Convention, had its website blocked by the military for “hostile content”. As it turned out, the website had been blocked; but, not due to its religious content, but because the site was identified as having malware, a malicious software, that was blocked by the military’s antivirus programming. The initial quick conclusion and reporting that this was religious bias, further evidences the growing suspicion many Christians have regarding the military.

American Civil Rights Union, Senior Legal Analyst Ken Klukowski, stated, “...this growing controversy is just the latest in a series of infringements on religious expression.” In support of his assertion, Klukowski provides several specific examples that have been shared by retired and active service members:

Coast Guard, Rear Admiral William D. Lee reported that in early May, “... he was told by lawyers he was crossing the line by giving a Bible to a wounded service member...Lee responded he would not stop sharing the gospel with people, regardless of whether military policy forbids it.”

Retired Col. Ron Crews, (Army chaplain), the executive director of the Chaplain Alliance for Religious Liberty (CARL), said, “...there are numerous examples of restricting religious expression in the military. [Including]:

- An Air Force Major with 18 years of service was told he had to remove his Bible from his desk, where it sat alongside family pictures and personal items.
- Another Air Force officer was told he could attend chapel services while in uniform, but could not read Scripture aloud, lead the congregation in prayer, or even serve as an usher.
- Air Force cadets last year had to stop participating in Operation Christmas Child in their dorms, where they competed to fill boxes with toys to give to children for Christmas. Cadets could only donate toys at the chapel.
- Crews received an email just two weeks ago from an Army chaplain who was told that during public ceremonies he could never mention the name “Jesus” in any context.”

As Klukowski concludes, “Whatever word you assign to these actions, they are suppressing the First Amendment rights of service members. And they span all the branches of the Armed Forces.”

Klukowski was one of the first to break this story and he has

also written of congressional inquiries regarding Weinstein’s influence or impact on policy, interference with chaplain’s duties by prohibition or prosecution, and progress by the military in implementing § 533 of the National Defense Authorization Act, which protects freedom of religious belief and conscience for all serving in the military, especially chaplains.

I hope these incidents are isolated and diminishing in frequency. Though the Obama administration suffers a reputation as being not very evangelical friendly, I suspect the DOD meeting with Weinstein was taken more out of a necessity of having to deal with him, rather than an intention to implement his radical anti-evangelical bigotry. After all, the President had more than “just a few” church attendees that voted for him, both times.

THE IRONY

Now, for a good dose of irony, from Crisis Magazine, in an article by American Spectator contributing editor, George Neumayr:

“Out of the military’s confused culture of loose moral philosophy, strict feminism, and combustible masculinity has come an endless stream of reports on sexual misconduct in the ranks. This week Congress mulled over the Pentagon’s admission that sexual assault cases have spiked 35 percent in the last two years.

‘The Pentagon, using anonymous surveys and sampling research, estimated that 26,000 active-duty personnel experienced ‘unwanted sexual contact’ last year, up from about 19,300 in 2010, according to an ongoing Defense Department study,’ reported the *Washington Post*.

How strange, then, that a military reeling from an epidemic of coarseness and immorality would continue to marginalize Christianity in its ranks. It is hardly suffering from an outbreak of Christian virtue and witness.”

Drawing from a fundamental Christian concept, all human beings are sinners and in need of a Savior. Therefore Christians are not perfect. Acknowledging the imperfection, Christianity—as practiced—tries to uplift, ennoble, and encourage its members to conduct themselves in the imitation of their sinless Savior. Hopefully they are transformed through their encounter with their risen and living Lord.

Will political correctness change the military? Will sharing one’s faith become the new, “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”? Or will polite Christians infuse the culture of our military with a proper display of conduct and character?



Linwood Bragan is the Executive Director of CapStand. He has an extensive background in political activism having served on numerous political campaigns and, most recently serving on Capitol Hill as a Congressional Counsel and Legislative Assistant.

Linwood has lectured in 20 states on political activism, finance, organization and elections. Email him at: linwood@capstand.org