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## *E Pluribus Unum: Religious Pluralism in the Military*

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Lieutenant Commander Reo N. Leslie, Jr., CHC, U.S. Navy

America has been called “a nation with the soul of a church.”<sup>1</sup> Religious language and symbolism rooted in the Judeo-Christian experience abounds in the history and social ritual of America. Since the first inaugural address of President George Washington, our chief executives have invoked “that Almighty Being who rules over the universe, who presides in the council of nations, and whose providential aids can supply every defect.”<sup>2</sup> And the first ten amendments to the Constitution included a prohibition against state-imposed religion and a guarantee of religious freedom for our citizens. Judeo-Christian thought is a part of our ethos and is reflected in our secular institutions, including law and politics. This phenomenon, studied extensively by historians and sociologists, has been called a variety of names, including “cultural religion,” “the religion of the Republic,” and “the American way of life.”<sup>3</sup> It is also referred to as “civil religion.”

In American history civil religion has had both a positive and a negative side. The negative side has been the couching of ideas like “manifest destiny” in religious language to justify such expansionist enterprises as the Mexican-American War. And one cannot help but notice how Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, the second president of the Naval War College, used ideas like “the need to safeguard Christian civilization” in formulating his theories of sea power and geopolitics.

The positive side has been a philosophy that calls the nation and its institutions into prophetic judgement based on common American ideals such as “equality, freedom, justice, democracy and humanity.”<sup>4</sup> This positive side emphasizes the common values uniting Americans despite their ethnic, cultural, denominational and creedal diversity.

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Lieutenant Commander Leslie has served as a U.S. Navy Chaplain since 1981. An ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, he holds a Doctor of Ministry from Chicago Theological Seminary and has published two books of sermons. He was graduated from the College of Naval Command and Staff, Naval War College, in June 1990, and is currently assigned as the Chaplain for the Marine Barracks, Washington, D.C.

The armed services of this “nation with the soul of a church” are citizen forces made up of men and women reflecting this diversity. It is only natural that they embody beliefs that come from both particular and common experiences; and, I might add, it is only natural that the United States, from its very beginnings, made provisions for its citizens in uniform to practice their religious beliefs.

### **The Military and the Accommodation of Religion**

Even prior to the Declaration of Independence, pastors were part of the colonial militia, providing religious and spiritual support to these units. Their selection procedure varied from colony to colony. In Virginia, for example, regimental chaplains were appointed by the legislature, while in other colonies the militia units themselves selected their chaplains.<sup>5</sup>

As the militia units were incorporated into the Continental army, their chaplains were also. In July 1775, the Continental Congress put the chaplaincy on a legal federal basis. Within a year thereafter, George Washington issued the following order: “The honorable Continental Congress having been pleased to allow a Chaplain to each Regiment, the Colonels or commanding officers of each Regiment are directed to procure chaplains accordingly; persons of good characters and exemplary lives, to see that all inferior officers and soldiers pay them a suitable respect and attend carefully upon religious exercises.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, since the earliest period of America’s national existence, there has been a recognition of the military’s responsibility to provide for the exercise of religion by personnel in uniform.

### **The Chaplain Corps and Endorsing Agencies**

The military chaplain is both an ordained member of the clergy and a commissioned staff officer. In addition to providing for worship in his own faith, he is responsible for facilitating the free exercise of religion for those of other faiths. This includes not only divine services, but pastoral counseling as well. Because of the characteristics of military life—such as forward deployment, relative isolation from the civilian community and constant relocation—chaplains are made available for pastoral service to active duty and retired personnel, military family members, and authorized DoD civilians, with primary emphasis given to the active duty service member.

Approximately 105 faith groups are represented in the Chaplain Corps of the Army, Navy and the Air Force. Chaplains are considered for appointment in a partnership between civilian religious bodies and the Department of Defense. Religious faith groups establish offices called ecclesiastical endorsing agencies for the purpose of certifying the professional qualifications of clergy for application and appointment as chaplains in the U.S. armed forces. The

Armed Forces Chaplains Board (AFCB) confers DoD recognition on these endorsing agencies in accordance with a number of specific requirements, including the ability to certify clergy who are qualified to provide for the free exercise of religion by all members of the military services and their dependents.

An endorsing agency nominates for appointment men and women who have met both its ordination requirements and the educational requirements established by DoD. In 1987 the Buddhist Churches of America (BCA) became the first non-Judeo-Christian faith group to become an ecclesiastical endorsing agency. Although no Buddhist chaplains have been appointed to the armed forces, the Rev. Hiroshi Abiko, resident minister of the Palo Alto Buddhist Temple, now serves as a chaplain at the Palo Alto Veterans Administration Hospital. It is also expected that the American Muslim Mission (the predominantly black Sunni religious body that grew out of Elijah Muhammed's Nation of Islam) will eventually apply to become an ecclesiastical endorsing agency.

### Increasing Religious Pluralism

The world has always been a religiously diverse place. Today's major religions include Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, Shintoism, Zoroastrianism, Taoism, Sikhism and Confucianism. We are now witnessing a great deal of this global diversity in America.

The United States is a nation of immigrants. As more Americans descended from non-European immigrant groups join the U.S. armed forces, they bring with them religious practices and beliefs that are part of their cultural experience. Also, more Americans are choosing to abandon the Judeo-Christian faith. The phenomenon of former Jews and Christians joining so-called "non-traditional" religious groups is part of the spiritual and social movement called "New Age." The term "New Age" includes movements as diverse as organized religions of the Eastern tradition, holistic healing, vegetarianism, Goddess spirituality, channeling and neo-paganism. These beliefs are now evident in our military personnel, because the U.S. armed forces are as religiously diverse as the society from which they draw their sailors, soldiers, marines and airmen.

The following examples of this diversity are taken from my own experience as a U.S. Navy chaplain.

***The Islamic Lay Leader.*** In 1981, at my first command (a destroyer squadron staff), a radioman second-class approached me during chaplain's call to say that there were five Muslims on board his destroyer who wanted to worship on a regular basis. He also requested certification as a command-recognized Islamic lay leader. After discussing the matter with the squadron commander

(who wanted to know, first of all, whether the navy recognized Islam as a religion) and with the ship's executive officer, a formal application was made by the radioman. Arrangements were made with the Imam at the local American Muslim Mission to train him and furnish him with appropriate credentials, and he was soon appointed by the ship's commanding officer as a lay leader. The radioman then arranged for regular Friday worship for the Muslims, and the ship organized a Lay Leader Advisory Council which included the Jewish, Islamic, Catholic, Protestant, Church of Christ and Latter Day Saint lay leaders.

**The "Secret" Bible Study.** On board the U.S.S. *Ranger* (CV 61) in 1986, we in the Chaplain Department were informed of a "secret" Bible study being conducted by a boiler technician first-class who belonged to The Way International. It was reported that he had accused the ship's chaplains of being "anti-Christ" (in league with the immoral, secular, humanist state religion) and that he had encouraged participants in the study not to attend activities of the command religious program. A chaplain interviewed the boiler technician, who denied any verbal assaults against the ship's chain of command or chaplains, but did indicate that he felt military chaplains were "compromised theologically" because they had to facilitate religion for all faith traditions. After the chaplain informed him that unauthorized meetings could not be held in a naval vessel, he gave the petty officer the opportunity to include his Bible study in the listing of other lay-led study groups and services. This the latter did, and his Bible study became a recognized part of the command religious program, open to attendance by all.

**The Muslim "A" School Student.** At Naval Training Station, San Diego, I received a call from a Master Chief on one of the "A" school staffs. A black female student had just reported after post-boot camp leave wearing an earring (nose-ring?) in her nose. She had stated she was a Sunni Muslim and the ring in her nose was a religious requirement. After I briefed him on the five pillars of Islam (fasting, two types of alms-giving, prayer and the pilgrimage to Mecca), he confronted the young Muslim again. She admitted it was a cultural preference, not a religious requirement, and voluntarily removed the ring from her nose.

**The Witch on the Watch.** In 1989, at the Naval Training Station, San Diego, a man reported to me that a female sailor with whom he had stood watch was a "Satanist." According to him, she had told him this while the two were discussing religious beliefs during a slow time at the quarterdeck. After talking with the sailor herself, I discovered she was not a Satan worshipper but a member of a local Goddess spirituality group. She considered Satanism to be a Christian heresy and a "repulsive, horrid religion," as Goddess

worshippers do. Instead, she worshipped the Great Goddess of pre-Christian and pre-Aryan times in ancient Europe. She considered herself a Goddess spirituality witch, not a Satanist witch.

These four cases demonstrate how increasing religious pluralism can affect uniform-wearing, working relations, good order and discipline, morale, and other issues important to any command. The armed forces of tomorrow will see the continual interaction of a multiplicity of religious traditions.

## Religion, the Military and Implications for the Future

What are some of the issues that increasing religious pluralism will raise in the armed services? I expect concerns to be raised in several areas.

***Religion, the Military and Legal Issues.*** Various landmark cases have already determined several aspects of the relationship of the religious citizen in uniform to military authority. In response to the Goldman vs. Weinberger case, where an Orthodox Jewish Air Force captain desired to wear his yarmulke in uniform, Congress passed a law in the FY 88/89 Defense Authorization Act's religious accommodation section authorizing the wearing of religious apparel under certain conditions by members of the armed services while they are in uniform. In the future, it is expected that new challenges will be brought to court. For example, the Sikhs are expected to seek court overturn of the "no-beards" policy of the military.

***Religion, The Military and Ethnic Issues.*** Religious preference also reflects ethnic, national, class, color and cultural realities. As pluralism in America grows, and continues to be mirrored in the military, issues related to "race relations" and "gender relations" will begin to take on more of a religious character. It is a fact that as of 1990 most American Muslims are of African or Arab descent, most Hindus are of South Asian descent, most adherents of Shamanism are of Native American descent, and most Goddess religion practitioners are women. This mix of religion, gender and ethnicity will make for some interesting times in the military.

***Military Education on Religious Rights.*** Both enlisted and officer personnel will require education on the rights of individuals to practice the religion of their choice. For the sake of enhancing positive working relations and fostering good order, discipline and high morale, military personnel must come to see that how a group defines its own religious tradition is of primary importance. For example, though fundamentalist Christian sailors may see the female follower of Goddess spirituality as a "Satanist" who denies the Biblical precept of addressing God as a male "Heavenly Father" because she prays

to a "Great Mother," or may regard the Buddhist who burns incense before the image of Amida Buddha as an "idolator," their opinion cannot be used as a cause for harassment, intimidation or discrimination. Education can go a long way to promoting interfaith understanding.

***The Military, Religion and Politics.*** Religious orientation can also influence political affiliation. The political-religious battle over abortion, the presidential campaigns of Jesse Jackson and Pat Robertson, and the political activism of both the Moral Majority and the Americans United for the Separation of Church and State are recent examples of the unity of politics and religion in the views of many Americans. Although such matters will not be decided in the military, I expect political pressure from groups either supporting or opposing religious pluralism to seek to influence DoD policy.

***The Military, Religion and the Chaplaincy.*** As the number of military personnel practicing non-Judeo-Christian religions increases, so will the need for chaplains from these faiths. By the next century the armed forces may have added Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, Religious Science, Unity and Wiccan chaplains to their ranks. If the United States chooses to augment its all-volunteer forces with a draft or national service program, as some in Congress propose, then the religious diversity of the uniformed services will be even greater. The Chaplain Corps of tomorrow may look nothing like the Chaplain Corps of today.

***Religion, The Military and Peace Issues.*** Congress and the courts have already established criteria for conscientious objection based on both membership in organized religion and personal understanding of spiritual and ethical principles. Just as Christianity and Judaism have their peace concerns and pacifist strains, so do Buddhism, Hinduism and other religious traditions. On 3 May 1983, the U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops released *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response, A Pastoral Letter on War and Peace*. This publication discussed Catholic teaching on just war, peace activism and nuclear defense. It is not hard to imagine other religious organizations doing the same. After all, the winner of the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize was the Dalai Lama (literally "Ocean of Wisdom"), leader of the Tibetan Buddhist community. A Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hahn, has been combining his religious life, spiritual teachings and work for peace for over two decades. The Hindu sage Mahatma Gandhi gave to the world his philosophy of non-violence, Satyagraha, which inspired Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Although most religious groups in America, including the "non-traditional" movements, do not oppose their members participating in military service, I expect faith groups to continue to fuse their spiritual views and views on peace. This will have some impact on the military.

**The Military and "Civil Religion."** Since the armed forces of tomorrow will have increased cultural, ethnic and religious diversity, it will do the military good to put greater emphasis on celebrations of things which all Americans hold in common. Command-sponsored programs like the Annual National Prayer Breakfast, POW/MIA Recognition Day, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Commemoration Day and service birthdays already focus on common values such as human rights, democracy, civic responsibility, freedom, justice and equality. These programs will become more important in the future in building esprit de corps and a sense of American identity and patriotic pride in an increasingly diverse armed forces. In a real sense, memorial services conducted by chaplains, whether the event or individual memorialized is affiliated with a Judeo-Christian faith tradition or not, serve the purpose of uniting diverse people together, even just for a moment, in a common spiritual experience. Recognizing this, many interfaith or ecumenical services in the military have begun to include Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic clergy in the program. For example, Thanksgiving services and Dr. King commemoration services have recently followed this pattern at military chapels.

**The Military, Religion and National Security.** In times of rapid social change, like our own, conditions often give rise to religious movements that are apocalyptic, messianic or even revolutionary. Recent examples of such groups include the Aryan Church, the World Way and the Founder's Church of Scientology. What should be the proper response when such movements begin to infiltrate the armed services of the United States? How will defense policy be influenced?

These issues, and others unforeseen, will affect how the United States conducts the business of national defense while meeting its obligation to provide for the free exercise of religion for all its men and women in uniform.

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## Notes

1. Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, *American Civil Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 45.
2. *Inaugural Addresses of the President of the United States: From George Washington 1789 to Richard Milhous Nixon 1969* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969), 2.
3. Richey and Jones, 3-18.
4. *Ibid.*, 17.
5. Richard G. Hutcheson, *The Churches and the Chaplaincy* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975), 23.
6. *Ibid.*

