

Spirituality in the Marine Corps

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20 February 2009

# Report Documentation Page

*Form Approved*  
*OMB No. 0704-0188*

Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

1. REPORT DATE <b>20 FEB 2009</b>	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-2009 to 00-00-2009</b>			
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>Spirituality in the Marine Corps</b>		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER			
		5b. GRANT NUMBER			
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER			
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER			
		5e. TASK NUMBER			
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER			
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>United States Marine Corps, Command and Staff College, Marine Corps University, 2076 South Street, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Quantico, VA, 22134-5068</b>		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER			
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)			
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)			
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT <b>Same as Report (SAR)</b>	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>15</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

## **Introduction**

In his address at Trinity College in June of 1941, Gen George C. Marshall warned, "The soldier's heart, the soldier's spirit, the soldier's soul are everything. Unless the soldier's soul sustains him, he cannot be relied on and will fail himself and his command and his country in the end."<sup>1</sup> The Marine Corps stresses the physical, mental, and spiritual development of Marines. Required training ensures that Marines are tested physically and mentally, but rarely are Marines challenged to develop their spiritual foundation. In the absence of formal training, the commander alone bears the responsibility to ensure his Marines are attending to their spiritual needs. Commanders must be more proactive in their task of facilitating religion which is the foundation for true spirituality.

### **Spirituality as a Relationship with God**

Although spirituality carries many different meanings, true spirituality is grounded on religion; specifically a relationship with God. Spirituality gives someone a sense of meaning and purpose. Since God is the creator of all life, a right relationship with Him will reveal one's ultimate purpose in the world. Spiritual strength must

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<sup>1</sup>Lieutenant Colonel R. T. Bright, USMC, "Teaching Ethics to Cause Behavioral Change in the Individual," (master's thesis, Command and Staff College), 1997.

have a source in which one places faith. Faith can have different foundations, but a relationship with God is the only true and stable foundation.

### **The Marine Corps' Definition of Spirituality**

NAVMC DIR 1500.58, the *Marine Corps Mentoring Program Guidebook*, is one of the few Marine Corps publications that attempts to define spirituality. The publication defines spirituality as that which gives a Marine a "sense of meaning and purpose, a sense of self, and that which is greater than self." It goes on to explain that spirituality "defines our values which provide the guiding principles for our moral compass and are the foundation from which we derive our purpose."<sup>2</sup> Though these aspects are true of spirituality, this definition fails to identify the source and foundation of one's values which provide meaning and purpose. Foundation is critical to spirituality because if the foundation is weak or lost, one may abandon faith and lose the associated sense of purpose. A commander cannot afford to allow his Marines to lose faith or purpose.

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<sup>2</sup>NAVMC DIR 1500.58, "Marine Corps Mentoring Program (MCMP) Guidebook," 13 February 2006, 26.

## **Spirituality vs. Ethics and Morality**

The Marine Corps stresses the importance of ethics and morality. Spirituality, however, deserves greater consideration because of its deeper impact into the core of an individual. Moral convictions and ethics, though often rooted in religious influences, may be exclusively based on family, social, and peer influences. Although these convictions may not necessarily be bad, they are also not necessarily good. Loosely grounded convictions may create problems for a commander when combat stress tests a Marine's resolve. Religion provides absolute principles of good and evil, and a Marine who has adopted these principles as a byproduct of faith, will not easily depart from them.

## **The Marine Corps' Attempt to Instill Values**

The Marine Corps teaches that all Marines must adhere to the Core Values of honor, courage, and commitment. They are taught to embrace these values because "it's what Marines do." Yet Core Values, like ethics and morality, must need a foundation of religion. LtCol Bright argues the importance of studying the origin of Core Values. He writes, "Knowing that one acted courageously, honorably, or with commitment is not sufficient, as knowing the 'why'

probes the deeper meaning in ethics."<sup>3</sup> If the institutions of family, society, or peer groups fail, the "why" will be answered in by God and his revealed purpose for life. For this reason, commanders must be more proactive in facilitating opportunities for religious exploration to encourage Marines to consider the true origin of their values and lead them toward a relationship with God.

### **Developing Spirituality in Peacetime**

Commanders must establish the foundation of spiritual during peacetime so that Marines will be spiritually grounded in war. Teaching, encouraging, and instilling spirituality must begin well before a Marine deploys for combat. General Carl Stiner, commanding officer of the US Special Operations Command, emphasizes the importance of morality, ethics, and spirituality over other pre-combat training. "How well our soldiers perform in combat is directly related to how well we prepare them in peacetime, and only part of this preparation is training related. The big part, in my mind, is moral, ethical, and spiritual strength..."<sup>4</sup> Gen George Marshall focuses on spirituality

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<sup>3</sup>LtCol Bright, "Teaching Ethics to Cause Behavioral Change in the Individual."

<sup>4</sup>Lieutenant Colonel Greg E. Metzgar, USA, "Fighting the War on Spiritual Terrorism - Part 1,"

when he attributes effective combat performance to spiritual strength. He writes that victory in battle is linked to spiritual morale which "can only come out of the religious nature of the soldier who knows God and who has the spirit of religious fervor in his soul."<sup>5</sup> Religious fervor does not happen instantaneously, but rather developed over time through prayer, meditation on scriptures, and fellowship with individuals of like religious convictions. Faith tested in peacetime that does not falter will more likely remain strong in war. All commanders care about the training and well-being of their Marines prior to going into war. They must equally invest in the spiritual welfare of their Marines before facing the ultimate test of combat.

### **Developing Spirituality during Combat**

Once Marines enter a combat zone, commanders must continue to facilitate their Marines' spiritual development. A strong spiritual foundation will provide stability, inner peace, and courage. A Marine will be more stable if he is firm in his beliefs and relationship with God, and he is

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<[http://www.ocfusa.org/pubs/metzgar\\_spiritual\\_terrorism.php](http://www.ocfusa.org/pubs/metzgar_spiritual_terrorism.php)> (25 January 2009).

<sup>5</sup>LtCol Bright, "Teaching Ethics to Cause Behavioral Change in the Individual."

convinced that the reasons for fighting are just and noble. Commanders are instrumental in confirming these beliefs within their Marines and must be the supreme example of stability. Along with stability, a Marine will have inner peace because of his knowledge that God is the author of life and death. Coming to terms with inevitable death will liberate Marines to make the right decision and act in the right manner. Commanders who demonstrate their own inner peace provide their Marines an example to emulate. Inner strength from stability and peace creates determination and courage in battle. Courage does not mean the absence of fear, but rather a bridled fear that allows bold feats in the face of danger. Once again, commanders can use spiritual principles to teach courage that stops short of being reckless or careless. One such example is the Biblical principles of courageously fighting against opposition to promote truth even to the point of war, yet simultaneously loving one's enemy enough to avoid unnecessary killing or suffering.

### **Developing Spirituality after Combat**

The need for spiritual strength does not end upon returning home. Commanders must be vigilant to combat their Marines' temptations to abandon faith in God. LtGen

Louis Metzger admits this temptation when he writes that although Marines become more interested in religion the closer they get to combat, "A significant number fall off after the combat is over."<sup>6</sup> Commanders can demonstrate the importance of spirituality at home by setting the example of responsible conduct on leave and liberty which does not compromise integrity and morality. Commanders can also attend to the needs of hurting Marines by reinforcing religious beliefs and communication with God to explain "why" certain things happen.

#### **Benefit of Spirituality after Traumatic Events**

Studies have shown that a person with a strong spiritual foundation will have greater resilience to recover from combat stress including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In her article titled, "Role of Faith and Resilience in Recovery from Psychotrauma," Dr. Unaiza Niaz studied victims recovering from traumatic events such as catastrophic earthquakes and tsunamis. She notes, "Trauma leads to the breakdown of fundamental beliefs and assumptions about the world, such as the belief that the world is essentially just or benevolent, that people have

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<sup>6</sup>Louis Metzger, Lieutenant General, USMC(Ret), "The Commanding Officer and the Chaplain," *Marine Corps Gazette* 89, no. 2 (Feb 2005): 26.

control over their lives, or that bad things do not ultimately happen to good people." She argues that people with strong religious beliefs who have experienced traumatic events are more likely to have greater resilience to recover, both mentally and emotionally.<sup>7</sup> Thus, religious convictions must continue to be encouraged after combat since it will increase resilience and aid in recovery from PTSD.

#### **Commander's Responsibility of Imparting Spirituality**

*The Commander's Handbook for Religious Ministry* affirms that "the facilitation of religion within Marine units is the responsibility of the Marine commander, not the chaplain."<sup>8</sup> This task has not led commanders to be proactive in promoting a Marine's religious exploration of spirituality. One reason commanders must be more proactive is that there are not enough chaplains in the military to do this job. In an article written in 2007, Eve Conant reported that within the entire DoD, the ratio of chaplains to service members was 1:518.<sup>9</sup> Another reason is that a

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<sup>7</sup>Unaiza Niaz, M.D., DPM, FRC, Psych (Eng), "Role of Faith and Resilience in Recovery from Psychotrauma," *Pakistan Journal of Medical Science* 22, no. 2 (April-June 2006): 204-207.

<sup>8</sup>MCRP 6-12C, "The Commander's Handbook for Religious Ministry Support," 2 February 2004: Preface.

<sup>9</sup>Eve Conant, "The Military: Faith Under Fire," *Newsweek* 149, no. 18 (May 2007): 26.

commander promoting spirituality will have the greatest impact on junior Marines. Chaplains are expected to be spiritually minded, but a commander who imbues spirituality will have profound effects on those under his leadership. The best reason to promote religious exploration, however, is because it is the greatest act of care from a commander to his subordinates.

### **Methods for Imparting Spirituality**

The task to facilitate religion is not simply satisfied by ensuring a chaplain is available to provide worship for each particular faith group. There are many more ways commanders should be proactive. First, they must set a command climate conducive to spiritual growth and ensure that the leadership supports this climate. Too often the atmosphere glamorizes alcohol, sex, and the pursuit of material possessions; qualities that work against spiritual growth. "The notion of a hero as one who is successful in achieving multiple sexual conquests, in accumulating vast wealth, or in engaging in Rambo-like exploits will lead to our total spiritual impoverishment."<sup>10</sup> A commander who jokes about such exploits is not setting

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<sup>10</sup>James H. Toner, *True Faith and Allegiance: The Burden of Military Ethics*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 81.

the proper climate. Creating an atmosphere does not mean proselytizing through promotion of a particular faith group or trying to convert others. However, the commander can and should encourage participating in various religious activities and worship services outside of work and may even show support by attending them himself. A commander must also educate himself on spiritual principles. Major Rook argues that in the Marine Corps "leaders need to study leadership from the stand point of the Bible, and it [Marine Corps] must incorporate biblical studies in its leadership program."<sup>11</sup> Above all else, the commander must lead by example. While promoting a climate that encourages spiritual growth, his character must exemplify the same virtues whether or not he ascribes to a particular faith base.

### **Counter Arguments**

Many commanders speak highly of the need for spirituality, and many chaplains have vouched for the support they have received from their commanders. CAPT Lawrence Greenslit, the Command Chaplain for MCB Quantico, Virginia argues that Marine Corps commanders are concerned

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<sup>11</sup>Major C. B. Rook, "Leadership: A Biblical Perspective," (master's thesis, Command and Staff College).

about spirituality. In his 15 years of chaplain service in the Marine Corps, he claims to have served under commanders who understood their responsibility for the Command Religious Program and how to properly utilize him as the chaplain.<sup>12</sup> Yet, others such as Father Michael Zuffoletto, who served as a chaplain for over 40 commanders, argues that they were often hesitant to speak of spiritual matters, not wanting to offend, and occasionally expressing that it wasn't their concern.<sup>13</sup> Other examples show what some commanders think of spirituality like LCDR Gary Heinke who was told by his commanding officer to "Do whatever it is chaplains do."<sup>14</sup> The debate, however, tends to come back to the definitions of spirituality and responsibility. If spirituality is simply holding on to anything which might provide meaning to life, even if it is unhealthy, then it is true that most people are spiritual. However, if spirituality is defined as a relationship with God, then the field is narrowed. Additionally, if a commander's responsibility towards spiritual development simply means not being antagonistic towards it, then certainly most

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<sup>12</sup>Captain Lawrence P. Greenslit, USN, interview by Captain Ben Friedrich, USMC, 16 January 2009.

<sup>13</sup>Reverend Michael P. Zuffoletto, interview by Captain Ben Friedrich, USMC, 13 January 2009.

<sup>14</sup>Lieutenant Commander Gary D. Heinke, USN, "Role of the Chaplain: Field Grade Officers Speak," (master's thesis, Command and Staff College), 1991.

would qualify. If commanders can encourage spiritual growth, but cannot tie that to a relationship with God as some would argue, then commanders are not developing true spirituality.

### **Conclusion**

Few commanders would openly deny the importance of spirituality. This viewpoint, however, has not led to proactive actions to change the climate to one in which spiritual growth is not simply tolerated, but actually encouraged. Because of the contribution of spirituality, not only in the lives of individual Marines, but also towards mission accomplishment, commanders must do more to facilitate spiritual growth at all echelons within their command.

**Word Count: 1,961**

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