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Does military service interfere with spiritual beliefs?

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Abstract

Military service and being a United States Soldier involves many things. It involves training, travel, working together in the protection of America's freedom and way of life. Soldiers stand ready at all times to deploy to foreign nations to fulfill this obligation. Every Soldier is committed and has this one common mission in their mind. Each Soldier is different and deals with their military service in different ways. Soldiers come from diverse cultures and ways of life, as well as having different beliefs and values. One belief that plays an important part of every Soldier's life is their spiritual belief. For some, their spiritual belief is what helps them to serve in the US Army. For others, their spiritual beliefs may interfere with their military service. An individual's spiritual belief is imperative to military service and is what every Soldier should stand on to accomplish the mission and serve as a valuable member of a team.

Does military service interfere with spiritual beliefs?

Today's US Army consists of approximately 675,000 Soldiers. The active duty Army is comprised of an estimated 488,000 Soldiers and the Army Reserve is comprised of an estimated 189,000 Soldiers. The US Army has sent over 120,000 Soldiers in support of Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom (GoArmy.com, 2005, 2). The Army is comprised of over 100 faith groups and denominations: all of which derived from different cultures and have vast beliefs. One common fact amongst all of them is that there is a basic spiritual belief in each. What is a spiritual belief?

A spiritual belief means a belief in an external power or being or deeply held moral or ethical belief, to which all else is subordinate or upon which all else is ultimately dependent, and which has the power or force to affect moral well-being. How does spiritual beliefs relate to military service? In our line of business, we as Soldiers need some being or someone stronger than ourselves to look to and lean on. We are warriors and we need to know that what we are doing fits in with our own spiritual beliefs and there are no contradictions. Before going to war, have we recognize the fact that we may have to pull the trigger and kill another human being? Do we understand the difference between killing and murder? If so, can we articulate that in our minds? Some Soldiers are not able to articulate the difference in their minds.

Many suicides amongst deployed Soldiers are due to this inability to do so. The current rate of suicide among deployed Soldiers serving in Iraq is higher than the Army average. This all leads back to having strong spiritual beliefs in something. Spirituality serves as a basis for morale, morals, and a code of ethics of what every Soldiers faces. A spiritual belief develops into resilience against matters or experiences a Soldier may face during his or her military service. History proves that faith in divine approval has helped Soldiers serve in combat

situations confident that their cause is just and their faith has increased their courage. It is very important that a Soldier knows and believes that there is a God or higher power constantly available to answer their hopes and prayers, as well as a higher power to comfort them in time of trouble, anxieties, fears, and tragedies.

Soldiers that do not have or possess a spiritual belief system find themselves in a spiritual alienation state. They find themselves feeling abandoned or rejected, feeling there is no way out. They feel helpless and powerless, not having anyone or anything to look to for support or guidance. This was common among Soldiers that fought in Vietnam. Many did not possess any kind of spiritual belief system prior to the war. Some initially thought their cause was just. The strong ones held tight to this belief and were able to cope with their experiences. Others quickly became disillusioned and what faith they had, diminished. Because of their diminished faith, they had difficulty making any sense of their mission in Vietnam as well as whether or not it fit in with their moral or spiritual beliefs. These veterans felt isolated from their god or spiritually alienated (Vietnam Veteran Ministers, 2004, 4).

Some Soldiers feel that they do indeed have a strong spiritual belief system that prevents them from serving in combat operations as well as military service. These Soldiers feel that participating in some or all wars violate their moral or spiritual beliefs. Soldiers that have these beliefs are conscientious objectors. Soldiers have filed and been discharged on the grounds of conscientious objection for many years. These Soldiers have become disillusioned and have lost the ability to overcome struggles within themselves with their faith issues. They lack the means to trust in their higher power to sustain them through combat actions as well as military service. Considering oneself as a conscientious objector is the individual's decision. The individual must

come to terms within themselves that they cannot serve in the military and serve their god simultaneously.

Some positive aspects result from Soldiers that may not possess spiritual beliefs prior to combat operations or military service. Soldiers have acknowledged that their combat experience in past wars including the current global war on terrorism have indeed helped them. They experienced both spiritual and psychological growth in their lives and military service because of these experiences. The testimonies and admissions from current warriors on the battlefield have sparked an interest in the training arena of Soldier enlistment in the military today. Due to the current war on terrorism, we must produce a more relevant and ready Soldier for the stressors of the current operating environment.

Soldiers in today's military service will find themselves deployed in harms way fighting the enemy head-on in the global war on terrorism. Terrorist conducts war behind the scenes by covert or secret means, attacking a population indiscriminately so long as it gains military control or victory. Terrorisms primary mission is to destabilize a population and to demoralize it that it can and will not resist takeover. Terrorism has always been prevalent. It is only now that it has become a major objective of the United States to deter. We must constantly prepare our forces for combat in support of the war on terrorism (Science and Theology News, 2002, 5).

How do we train the newest warriors for the global war on terrorism? We have always incorporated training in physical fitness, weapons, leadership, and equipment in our daily routines (Science and Theology News, 2002, 5).

. Each area of training is important for mission accomplishment. However, to produce a more ready and relevant warrior, that will serve as a force multiplier on the battlefield, we must complement current training with instruction in spirituality. This training or instruction would be equally important as the other areas of training, but would aid in producing a Soldier with some kind of inner resiliency and an overall better Soldier.

The Soldier that goes through this instruction is well rounded and will have a better chance of being able to cope with the negative experiences of combat or military service, as well as the positive. This Soldier will definitely know that he or she can draw upon something stronger and greater than himself or herself to get through the most difficult times. During life or death situations, they are able to be strong and confident in a higher power. If you have two Soldiers, both trained identically, one has a basis of spirituality and the other does not. When times get tough, the Soldier that has a basis of spirituality will be able to reach inside and trust in that spiritual belief to get them through that period of their lives. The other Soldier will have nothing to stand on or believe in and will most likely fail under pressure.

For that reason, Soldiers who possess that strong basis of spiritual beliefs in their lives will most likely succeed or surpass that Soldier that does not. Implementing spiritual training into a Soldier's training regiment will greatly decrease the number of Soldiers returning home from combat operations with psychological problems. George Washington had spoken to his troops at Valley Forge: "While we are zealously performing the duties of good citizens and Soldiers, we certainly ought not to be inattentive to the higher duties of religion. To the distinguished character of a patriot, it should be our highest glory to laud the more distinguished character of a Christian." Obedience to God was more important than winning. The Continental Congress purchased over 20,000 bibles, not to impress God or the Church, but to ensure that they

were conducting the war on Gods terms, not their own (Terrorism and Metaphysical Stability, 2005, 7).

In conclusion, the global war on terrorism increases our need for training in spiritual warfare as well as military warfare. History proves that Soldiers that do not have a strong spiritual belief in a higher power or something greater than him or herself are more susceptible to social and psychological problems upon return from combat operations. Therefore, having a spiritual belief in something greater than oneself greatly augments military service whether than interferes with military service today.

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