

**Military Leadership and Education:
Religion's Role in the U.S. Military Mission**



DEFENSE EQUAL OPPORTUNITY MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE
DIRECTORATE OF RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT AND STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

Dr. Richard Oliver Hope Human Relations Research Center
Directed by Dr. Daniel P. McDonald, Executive Director
366 Tuskegee Airmen Drive Patrick AFB, FL 32925
321-494-2747

Prepared by
Dr. Daniel P. McDonald
CDR Charlotte Hunter



Tech Report No. 21-05

Introduction

In a landmark case involving the military and religion, Supreme Court Justice William Brennan commented upon the enviable attitude of the United States and its people with regard to respect for religious difference in his dissent in the Supreme Court case *Goldman v. Weinberger* (1986), 475 U.S. 503:

Through our Bill of Rights, we pledged ourselves to attain a level of human freedom and dignity that had no parallel in history. Our constitutional commitment to religious freedom and to acceptance of religious pluralism is one of our greatest achievements in that noble endeavor. Almost 200 years after the First Amendment was drafted, tolerance and respect for all religions still set us apart from most other countries and draws to our shores refugees from religious persecution from around the world. (Brennan, 1986)

But, Justice Brennan warned, this respect for difference requires vigilance, specifically on the part of military leaders:

[I]n pluralistic societies such as ours, institutions dominated by a majority are inevitably, if inadvertently, insensitive to the needs and values of minorities when these needs and values differ from those of the majority. The military, with its strong ethic of conformity and unquestioning obedience, may be particularly impervious to minority needs and values. (Brennan, 1986)

Religious diversity in the U.S. Armed Forces serves both as source of inspiration and a source of confusion, often simultaneously. The military Services have wrestled with establishing a holistic approach toward their personnel that embraces human diversity without sacrificing traditionally high standards of character, obedience, unit cohesion, esprit de corps, and mission readiness, to include effective interaction with foreign nationals whose cultures differ from those of the majority population. This wrestling match is perhaps nowhere more confusing or complex than when addressing the holy and the secular; how military leaders engage with religion—domestically and in out of the continental United States (OCONUS) operational areas of responsibility—without becoming engaged in a “religious mission.”

Religious issues surrounding military service have made their way into the nation’s headlines frequently in the last decade. In some cases the military was found lacking in support of religious groups in their midst, perhaps most notably in 2005 with the investigation of religious treatment of cadets at the U.S. Air Force Academy (Cook, 2007), or the nine-year battle waged by family members of Wicca military members killed in Iraq to gain approval from the Veterans’ Administration of the Wicca faith emblem on federally-supplied headstones (Egbert, 2007). Other cases have highlighted prejudicial actions or words on the part of individuals, such as the alleged actions of conservative and evangelizing Christians in the Iraq and Afghanistan theatres (Sharlet, 2009), rather than institutional behavior, resulting in highly visible and oftentimes embarrassing instances that have outshone the reality of DoD’s commitment to the accommodation of religious diversity within its ranks.

Increased awareness of religious diversity and sound leadership sensitivity to that diversity (1) provides DoD leaders with information relating to recruitment, retention, and readiness; (2) enhances DoD's ability to develop and provide training and education that effectively addresses issues related to the religious self-identification of current and potential military members and its impact on the military mission; and (3) enables military leaders' to fulfill their statutory and policy responsibilities to provide for and accommodate the religious practices of its members.

Religious Composition of the Armed Forces

Table 1 (see Appendix A) explains the results of a 2009 survey, Religious Identification and Practices Survey (RIPS) conducted on religious identification in the Armed Forces.¹ It is shown in the context of data supplied by the Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) as well as data from two recent national civilian surveys. The DMDC figures represent data taken from individuals when they first enter the service or on those occasions when Service members voluntarily update their religious preferences in their personal information file, and as such, DMDC figures are administrative data, not statistics based on random sampling.

Overall, RIPS figures verify those provided by DMDC, but RIPS provides a greater precision and explanation not present in the DMDC figures. RIPS data reflect higher numbers of people who self-identify as Jewish, Muslim, Pagan, Eastern, and Humanist than do DMDC data. In these categories, however, RIPS figures are closely aligned with two respected religious identification surveys of the U.S. population, the American Religious Identification Survey, commonly referred to as ARIS (Kosmin & Keysar, 2008), and the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey (Pew, 2008).

The younger military demographic is also reflected in the No Religious Preference (NRP) category. Fully 25% of RIPS respondents claim this identification versus 20% reported by DMDC and 12% to 15% for the overall U.S. population reported by ARIS and the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey. This identification appears to be age-dependent. Of those Service members aged 18–30, 28% selected NRP as their religious identification, in contrast to those who are 31–40 (24%), 41–50 (16%), and those 51 and older (10%).

Civilian surveys such as ARIS have documented the steady rise of the NRPs (often called Nones) during the past two decades, particularly among young adults (Dougherty *et al.*, 2007; Kosmin & Keysar, 2008; Pew, 2010a). Although those who claimed some form of Christian identity constituted by far the largest single category (65.84%), the next largest group of military members is NRPs (25.5%). They were followed by separately identified groups within Christianity including some form of Catholic (20.11%) and some form of Baptist (17.56%). No other single category claimed a double-digit percentage, but the RIPS results indicate the military contains nearly as many Humanists (Atheists or Agnostics) as Methodists (3.61% versus 3.7%), and more Pagans than Episcopalians (1.18% versus .86%).

Religious Diversity Interactions

Because RIPS was administered as part of the DEOMI Organizational Climate Survey (DEOCS), it was possible to relate the religious characteristics of military members to other demographic attributes. For example, a significantly smaller percentage of officers/warrants, compared to enlisted, identified as NRP, and this difference was greater at younger ages (see Table 2, Appendix B). By comparing all NRPs with those who identified as Roman Catholic, RIPS indicates that enlisted members tend to be more religious in more senior ranks than junior ranks. This finding may lead to important insights with respect to training and leadership. Senior members of the force, many of whom are motivated by religious principles, must recognize that significant numbers of those they lead may possess no similar tenets.

RIPS also asked twenty-eight questions related to religious beliefs and attitudes. These questions permit further investigation of religious diversity in the context of demographic diversity. The results shown in Table 3 (see Appendix C) point to significant differences in religiousness in the military demographic groups, compared with their civilian counterparts. In addition, when comparing the importance respondents ascribed to religion in their lives, significant variations appear based on race, ethnicity, and gender, within the military and compared with the overall civilian population.

As shown in Table 3 (see Appendix C), female Service members tend to believe religion is more important in their lives than males, while Black Service members, male and female, view religion as more important than members of other races; these findings, for females and Blacks, are in accordance with current population surveys (Pew, 2009 & 2008). With regard to Hispanic military members, however, the percentages of those who believe religion is important in their lives is less than those in the general population (Pew, 2010b), wherein 68% of Hispanics indicate religion is very important in their lives. The discrepancy between military and civilian Hispanics may indicate a difference in the segment of the Hispanic population that finds the military an attractive option for service as well as the relative proportion of the Hispanic population who is eligible to serve.

Religious diversity, and awareness of and sensitivity thereto on the part of leaders, may also relate to aspects of mission accomplishment and Service members' views of the religious climate in which they serve. All RIPS respondents recorded their agreement, indecision, or disagreement with the statement, "If a person is willing to deal with me honestly, I can trust them regardless of their religious beliefs" (see Appendix D, Table 4 and note the scale shown is compressed from the survey scale of Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree). The disparities presented illustrate how Service member attitudes differ based on religious preference.

The majority of religious traditions (Methodist, Roman Catholic, Other Protestant, Charismatic, Evangelical, and Baptist) tend overwhelmingly to agree that they can trust those holding differing religious beliefs; indeed, with the exception of Evangelicals, few were in disagreement. Respondents identifying themselves as NRP agreed with the statement much less and disagreed at nearly twice the rate of those in majority religions, although not as strongly as the Evangelicals. Humanists agreed with the statement more than those who identified with majority religions or NRPs yet also disagreed by a larger percentage than did those who identified with majority religions, indicating a greater degree of polarization on this question. Adventists, whose long history of conscientious objection and unorthodox religious practices

(e.g., Saturday Sabbath or dietary standards) distinguish them from members of majority religions, indicated an even higher rate of disagreement than NRPs, but not as high as Evangelicals.

Diversity may offer a way to look at the tendency to “trust less” others from differing religious traditions by the NRPs, Evangelicals, Humanists, and Adventists surveyed. The greater levels of doubt among these four groups may reflect discrimination these groups have faced from members of the dominant religious culture, both in civilian life and within the U.S. military. As noted earlier, religious discrimination is not uncommon in the Armed Forces. In 2008, for example, an atheist soldier filed suit against the DoD, alleging discrimination directed toward him by Christians offended by his disbelief, his unwillingness to participate in public prayers, and his desire to hold meetings with fellow military atheists (Kaye, 2008; Blumner, 2008). Another atheist soldier filed suit, insisting that the delivery by his unit chaplain of sectarian prayers at mandatory formations effectively forced religion upon him, in violation of his rights under the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution (Chalker, 2008; Milburn, 2010).

Evangelical Christians have also complained of prejudice on the part of military leaders; a group of Evangelical military chaplains, for example, claimed that proposed restrictions upon the use of sectarian language in public prayers, particularly at mandatory formations, constituted unwarranted institutional restriction upon their freedom of speech (Shane, 2008). Although the evidence gained from RIPS is not conclusive, the levels of distrust among Service members, as evidenced in Table 4 (see Appendix D), indicate that more investigation on the part of military leaders and perhaps a more robust means of inculcating in leaders a strong degree of awareness of and sensitivity to their personal religious attitudes may be in order to ameliorate instances of religious discrimination, perceived and actual, that occur within their units, as well as, in leaders’ interactions with foreign nationals.

Religious Awareness and the Military Leader

The DoD’s implementing instruction on religious accommodations, for example, requires that commanders who are addressing questions about religious accommodation within their own units to take into account several factors including: (1) the religious importance of the accommodation to the requester, (2) the cumulative impact of repeated accommodations, (3) and alternative means to meet the requested accommodation. This responsibility requires individual commanders to weigh and make decisions about complex theological and praxis issues in a highly diverse environment. When similar decisions must be made regarding sensitive religious issues in the operational theatre, these same factors may be useful, but all point to a higher requirement, that military leaders gain and exercise knowledge about religious dynamics, to include their own presuppositions.

Does the DoD instruction place an undue burden on commanders? These men and women receive little or no formal instruction in comparative religions, in sociology, or in the history of religion except during the hurried preparations for deployment. This sets up the possibility that even the most fair-minded commander may walk into a religious landmine armed with little or no clear guidance. Relying on religious beliefs with which the commander is reasonably comfortable or familiar may serve little purpose; the ability to address, with clarity

and sensitivity, those beliefs with which the commander is uncomfortable or unfamiliar is critical.

In seeking to avoid accusations of favoritism and capriciousness, some leaders are tempted to adopt the seemingly safe policy of uniformity in their approach to religious diversity, domestic and foreign, diminishing, or even dismissing the notion of the cultural importance of religion within their own units as well as in relation to foreign nationals. This reflects a secularized approach to leadership that seeks to equate religion with malleable social and cultural aspects of individuals and communities; from boot camp and onward, one can change one's religion—or, at the very least, suppress its expression—as easily as one can accept the required changes to one's hair style.

Conclusion and Suggestions

The military appears to reflect the religious diversity of U.S. society closely in minority faith-group representation, those who identify themselves as possessing no religious preference and those who claim affiliation with groups traditionally considered outside the religious mainstream (Pagan, Eastern, Humanistic, etc). These same religious demographics also reveal a military that tends to be less religious and consequently less religiously aware than the civilian population at large. Taken as a whole, these findings suggest a potentially strong impact on training, doctrine, recruitment, and retention.

What can be done to improve knowledge and understanding of religious difference, with respect to the military mission, within the ranks of military leadership?

- Leaders can take advantage of the expertise that resides among their staff members, such as chaplains. Joint Publication 1-05 (JP 1-05) states, for example, that, “[I]n many situations, clergy-to-clergy communication is preferred by the indigenous religious leader. Military chaplains with the requisite knowledge, experience, and training/education have religious legitimacy that may directly contribute positively to the JFC’s mission” (JP 1-05, III-4). While such use of chaplain resources is a “narrow and focused role,” this is one means by which a U.S. military leader can effect interaction with foreign nationals, particularly religious leaders, “on matters of religion to ameliorate suffering and to promote peace and the benevolent expression of religion...address[ing] religion in human activity without employing religion to achieve a military advantage” (JP 1-05).
- Service schools can promote education in comparative religions and in the sociology/anthropology of religion, highlighting the mission advantages of gaining such knowledge.
- Attempts to cultivate an informed approach to religious difference—domestic and international—may best be served by existing institutions, in particular those whose educational efforts specifically target the increase in self-knowledge and self-improvement. Leaders can explore, at length, the cultural lenses through which they see religion, their own, that of unit personnel, and that which predominates in the leader’s

area of responsibility and it can provide the greatest degree of effective situational awareness.

Filling this “capabilities gap” does not and will not make the military mission “religious,” but will ensure military leaders have at their disposal knowledge gained through focused, effective cultural training and education.

References

- Blumner, R. E. (2008, May 4). This Atheist Finds He Needs a Foxhole. *St. Petersburg Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.tampabay.com/opinion/columns/article483665.ece#>.
- Brennan, W. (1986, March 25). *Goldman v. Weinberger* (1986), 475 U.S. 503. United States Supreme Court.
- Cook, H. (2007). Service before Self? Evangelicals Flying High at the U.S. Air Force Academy. *Journal of Law and Education*, 36, 1–13.
- Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC). (2009, September). *Data File on Religious Statistics of Military Members(Active duty and Reserve)*. Compiled for the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute (Restricted data).
- Dougherty, K. D.; Johnson, B. R.; & Polson, E. C. (2007). Recovering the Lost: Remeasuring U.S. Religious Affiliation. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46, 483–499.
- Department of Defense. (2009, November 13). Joint Publication 1-05. *Religious Awareness in Joint Operations*. Retrieved from http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp1_05.pdf.
- Egbert et al. v. Nicholson* (2007). (Case number not assigned). U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims. Retrieved from <http://www.aclu.org/religion-belief/egbert-v-nicholson-petition-us-court-appeals-veterans-claims>.
- Hunter, C. E. & Smith, L. M. (2010). Religious Identification and Practices Survey. Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute (forthcoming).
- Kaye, R. (2008, July 9). Atheist Soldier Sues Army for ‘Unconstitutional’ Discrimination. *CNN*. Retrieved from <http://www.cnn.com/2008/US/07/08/atheist.soldier/index.html#cnnSTCText>.
- Kosmin, B. A. & Keysar, A. (2008). *American Religious Identification Survey*. Retrieved from http://www.americanreligionsurvey-ariss.org/reports/ARIS_Report_2008.pdf.
- Milburn, J. (2010, January 9). Atheist’s Lawsuit Against DoD Dismissed. *Navy Times*. Retrieved from http://www.navytimes.com/news/2010/01/ap_atheist_lawsuit_dismissed_010710/.
- Paley, A. R. (2008, May 30). Marine in Iraq Suspended over Coins Quoting Gospel. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/05/29/AR2008052903683.html>.
- Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life. (2008). *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <http://www.religions.pewforum.org>.

- Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life. (2009). *A Religious Portrait of African Americans*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=389>;
- Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life. (2010a). *Religion Among the Millenials*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <http://www.pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=510>.
- Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life. (2010b). *Changing Faiths: Latinos and the Transformation of American Religion*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <http://pewforum.org/surveys/hispanic/>.
- Shane, L. III. (2008, July 23). Bill Would Lift Limits on Chaplains' Language. *Stars and Stripes*. Retrieved from <http://www.stripes.com/article.asp?section=104&article=56304>.
- Sharlet, J. (2009, May). Jesus Killed Mohammed: The Crusade for a Christian Military. *Harper's Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.harpers.org/archive/2009/05/0082488>.
- U. S. District Court for the District of Kansas. (2008). *Chalker and Military Religious Freedom Foundation v. Gates* (No. 08-cv-02467). Retrieved from http://www.militaryreligiousfreedom.org/chalker_dismissal_filing.pdf.

Appendix A

Table 1

Faith Group Identification by DEOMI, DMDC, ARIS, and Pew Religious Landscape Survey

Faith Group	DEOMI Totals	DEOMI %	DMDC %	ARIS %	PEW %
Adventist	165	2.77	0.34	0.41	0.5
Baptist	1045	17.56	13.88	15.84	17.2
Brethren	16	0.27	0.04		0.1
Congregational	133	2.23	0.55		2.9
Episcopal	51	0.86	0.66	1.05	1.5
Evangelical	59	0.99	0.55	1.3	0.3
Lutheran	153	2.57	2.36	3.8	4.6
Methodist	220	3.70	3.61	4.98	6.2
Charismatic	172	2.89	1.52	3.13	5.6
Presbyterian	100	1.68	0.93	2.07	3
Other Protestant	389	6.54	4.92	7.99	9.4
Catholic	1197	20.11	20.22	25.07	23.9
Orthodox	24	0.40	0.11	0.64	0.6
Other Christian	195	3.28	19.56	9.7	2.7
Jewish	65	1.09	0.32	1.17	1.7
Muslim	27	0.45	0.25	0.6	0.6
Pagan	70	1.18	0.17		0.4
Eastern	52	0.87	0.42	0.86	1.1
Less Common	71	1.19	0.62	1.23	0.8
Humanist	215	3.61	0.55	1.58	4
NRP	1518	25.50	19.55	13.4	12.1
Data Error	15	0.25	8.87	5.18	0.8
Total	5952	100.00	100	100	100

Source: Authors' calculations based on Hunter & Smith, forthcoming; DMDC 2009; Kosmin & Keysar, 2008; and Pew, 2008.

Appendix B

Table 2

Religious Preference – No Religious Preference v. Roman Catholic

	Religious Preference	
	Age 40 or less	Age > 40
No Religious Preference		
Officer/Warrant	15.65%	9.68%
Enlisted	27.63%	17.27%
Roman Catholic		
Officer/Warrant	24.94%	26.88%
Enlisted	17.30%	23.45%

Source: Authors' calculations based on Hunter & Smith, forthcoming.

Appendix C

Table 3

How Important is Religion in Your Life?

	Very Important	Important	Moderately Important	Of Little Importance	Unimportant
Race					
Non-Hispanic Black Male	49.02%	21.94%	18.76%	3.93%	6.35%
Non-Hispanic Black Female	61.36%	21.36%	10.45%	4.55%	2.27%
Other Male	25.69%	19.24%	25.92%	12.37%	16.78%
Other Female	31.05%	23.08%	25.73%	9.79%	10.35%
Ethnicity					
Hispanic Male	28.74%	23.22%	25.83%	9.58%	12.63%
Hispanic Female	34.72%	24.31%	27.08%	6.25%	7.64%
Other Male	28.77%	19.02%	24.84%	11.53%	15.85%
Other Female	38.81%	22.38%	21.24%	8.98%	8.60%

Source: Authors' calculations based on Hunter & Smith, forthcoming.

Note: Non-Hispanic Blacks and Non-Black Hispanics

Appendix D

Table 4

Willingness to Work with Religious ‘Others’

Q27 If a person is willing to deal with me honestly, I can trust them regardless of their religious beliefs.

	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
Methodist	77.27	20.91	1.82
Roman Catholic	70.14	26.43	3.44
Other Protestant	78.66	17.22	4.11
Charismatic	78.49	16.86	4.65
Baptist	70.72	24.4	4.88
Humanist	80	13.49	6.51
NRP	54.94	36.76	8.3
Adventist	59.39	31.52	9.09
Evangelical	79.66	10.17	10.17

Source: Authors’ calculations based on Hunter & Smith, forthcoming

¹ Religious Identification and Practices Survey (RIPS), administered as Part B of the DEOMI Organizational Climate Survey (DEOCS) from July 1 to July 16, 2009. During this period the DEOCS was taken by 14,769 military participants, of whom 6,384 voluntarily elected to complete the RIPS (38%). Although DEOCS and RIPS participants were not random sample of the population of concern, the demographic characteristics of those who took the DEOCS during this period closely match those of the force at large. In addition, no statistically significant variations were found to exist between those who took the RIPS and those who did not, in terms of race, ethnicity, age, gender, or rank. The RIPS consisted of 30 questions, two of which addressed the respondents' self-identified religious affiliation, while the remainder addressed respondents' attitudes toward religiously-related subjects and beliefs. Of those who completed the RIPS, only .25% did not provide valid responses regarding religious affiliation.