

ONWARD CHRISTIAN SOLDIERS: CHRISTIAN SUPREMACISTS IN THE U.S. MILITARY

By Nick Gier, Professor Emeritus, University of Idaho

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We hunt people for Jesus. We do, we hunt them down.
Get the hound of heaven after them, so we get them into the Kingdom.

-- Lt. Col. Gary Hensley, Chief Chaplain in Afghanistan

The evangelicals want to subvert the system. They have a very clear social and political agenda. The evangelical tone is pervasive at the Air Force Academy.

--MeLinda Morton, fired Lutheran Air Force Chaplain

I'm convinced that the military environment stands in naked violation of what is meant by the separation of church and state.

-- A retired military chaplain

Sometime in 2008 while serving in Afghanistan Sgt. Jon Watt received a shipment of bibles from his home church. They were obviously not meant for personal use, because they were in the Dari and Pashto language. They had no purpose other than to be distributed among Muslim Afghans. Documented on video by filmmaker Brian Hughes, Sgt. Watt admitted that he had given away bibles while on a previous tour in Iraq. "I bought a carpet and then I gave the guy a bible after I conducted my business. The expressions that I got from the people in Iraq were just phenomenal. They were hungry for The Word." FactCheck.org confirmed that Sgt. Watt's bibles were destroyed on orders from a chaplain. Furthermore, they correct the slanderous accusation that this was on director orders from President Obama. These events of course happened during the Bush administration.

The Hughes video also contains a sermon by delivered by Lt. Col. Gary Hensley, chief of U.S. military chaplains in Afghanistan, who declared that, just like the Special Forces, "we hunt people for Jesus. We do, we hunt them down. Get the hound of heaven after them, so we get them into the Kingdom." An army spokesman said that Hensley's words were taken out of context but you can view the entire video on YouTube to see that the main point was to evangelize the native population.

Central Command General Order No. 1 explicitly states that "proselytizing of any faith, religion or practice" is strictly forbidden. In the video Sgt. Watt acknowledges the order but he

defends his actions by saying that he was only giving the bibles as gifts. Every year the Gideons give out free New Testaments on our campuses, and Sgt. Watt is evangelizing just as much they are. He freely admits that the Iraqis were “hungry for The Word.” Not only was Watt violating military code, he was also confirming many Muslims’ worst fears that the U.S. is involved in a world-wide crusade against their faith. This outrageous behavior places all Americans abroad—civilian and military—in much greater danger.

A spokesman for Christian Embassy, Campus Crusade's military and diplomatic ministry, states that Christian soldiers are "government paid missionaries." In 2007 the Pentagon’s Inspector General issued a 47-page report that, according to the *Washington Post* (8-17-07), “concluded that seven current or former military officers violated ethics rules when they appeared in uniform in a promotional and fundraising video for the evangelical group Christian Embassy.”

Former Navy Chaplain Gordon J. Klingenschmitt defends the distribution of Watt’s bibles, claiming that there is a difference between evangelizing and proselytizing. In 2007 Klingenschmitt was disciplined for not being inclusive enough in a service for a Catholic sailor, and then later court-martialed for disobeying an order not to appear in uniform at political event. Klingenschmitt’s once described his obligation to soldiers of other faiths as follows: "It is the highest act of love I can show to my Buddhist or Muslim friends to tell them the truth."

Gen. Cecil R. Richardson, the Air Force deputy chief of chaplains also stresses the distinction: "We will not proselytize, but we reserve the right to evangelize the unchurched." In an interview with Richardson Laurie Goodstein of the *New York Times* learned that proselytizing is “trying to convert someone in an aggressive way, while evangelizing is more gently sharing the gospel.” One might argue that is a very fine line to draw. At church summer camp I always felt coerced even by the soft sell that was offered. There are no conflicting freedoms here. A soldier’s right not to be pressed on religious matters always overrides any chaplain’s right to evangelize.

The people at FactCheck.org are also not buying this distinction between evangelizing and proselytizing. Referring to the Oxford English Dictionary, they found that "proselytizing" means "the process of making, or seeking to make, proselytes or converts." It defines "evangelism" as "the preaching or promulgation of the Gospel," and gives an added definition: "zealous advocacy of a cause or doctrine, proselytizing zeal." Sgt. Watt’s zeal is obvious in his zealous gifting of bibles and rejoicing in the “phenomenal” reception of the Gospel.

The issue of evangelical Christians subverting military policy about proselytizing and respecting religious freedom came to light most dramatically at the Air Force Academy in 2005. A *Washington Post* (5-13-05) story cited some cadets who complained about “insults aimed at Jews, Roman Catholics and non-evangelical cadets,” and reported a chaplain who declared that any cadet not born again would "burn in the fires of hell."

The Air Force Academy asked a delegation from Yale Divinity School to investigate these complaints, as well as charges of sexual assaults against female cadets. Yale Prof. Kristen Leslie summarized their findings: "What we found was this very strong evangelical Christian

voice dominating. We thought that just didn't make sense in light of their mission, which was to protect and train cadets, not to win religious converts." The most egregious violation of religious neutrality was the "Team Jesus" banner hanging in the locker room of the Academy's football team.

Chief chaplain Col. Michael Whittington was not happy with the Yale report, but Melinda Morton, a Lutheran minister and executive officer of the chaplain unit, agreed with the criticisms: "The evangelicals want to subvert the system. They have a very clear social and political agenda." Whittington removed her from her position and arranged for her to be transferred to Okinawa.

Mickey Weinstein, as well as his father and his two sons, have served or are now serving in the Air Force. While at the Academy, Weinstein experienced anti-Semitic harassment. Nasty notes were taped to his door, he was repeatedly asked why the Jews killed Jesus, and twice he was viciously attacked. He has now set up the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, whose attorneys are now representing Jeremy Hall (read below) in a suit against the army. Weinstein's most recent coup was to persuade the Pentagon to disinvite Franklin Graham from speaking at a National Day of Prayer event because of his attacks on Muslims. Weinstein receives lots of hate mail, much of it anti-Semitic.

In a June 2005 appearance before the Jewish Anti-Defamation League, Lt. Gen. John Rosa, Commander of the Air Force Academy, admitted that there had been problems with proselytizing and religious intolerance at his institution. He told Jeff Sharlet that "restoring constitutional principles to the academy would take at least six years." One would surely hope for a more prompt resolution of serious legal violations. Sharlet is author of *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power* (Harper, 2008); and *C Street: The Fundamentalist Threat to American Democracy* (Little & Brown, 2010).

When Sharlet interviewed Rosa's successor Lt. Gen. John Regni in 2008, he asked him: "How do you see the balance between the Free Exercise Clause and the Establishment Clause?" Sharlet was amazed at the non-answer he received: "Regni consulted with two of his advisers, a colonel and a retired colonel, said they weren't quite familiar with those constitutional things, and ultimately decided to pass on the question." These officers took an oath to defend the Constitution, but they appear ignorant of some of its basic principles.

Some Army officers don't seem to have accurate knowledge of constitutional principles either. Specialist Jeremy Hall was holding a meeting he arranged for atheists and free-thinkers, but Maj. Freddy J. Welborn intervened and declared: "People like you are not holding up the Constitution and are going against what the founding fathers, who were Christians, wanted for America." Welborn, according to the New York Times (4-26-08), "told the soldiers he might bar them from re-enlistment and bring charges against them." Welborn obviously has not read Thomas Jefferson's advice to his nephew Peter Carr: "Question with boldness even the existence of God." Read more about the religious liberalism of the founding fathers at www.class.uidaho.edu/foundfathers.htm

A Mormon (who prefers to remain anonymous) left the Marine Corps in the late 1990s primarily because he was tired of his faith being described as “wicked” and “Satanic.” He received these slurs even from his commanding officers. He has now returned to military service and is training to become a chaplain so that he can offer pastoral care to soldiers who feel that their religious beliefs are not being respected.

On September, 2010 a group of retired chaplains wrote to the Pentagon charging that many chaplains will be forced to leave their positions if “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” is repealed. They claim that chaplains will no longer be allowed to preach against homosexuality and their religious freedom will therefore be abridged. The Rev. Klingenschmitt did not have to bring down God’s wrath on non-Christians at the memorial service, so there is no reason for chaplain employed by the U.S. government to preach against gays and lesbians. Again their right not to be harassed always overrides a chaplain’s right to preach anything he wants while in military uniform. Evangelical chaplains who now have to minister to openly gays and lesbian soldiers will have a great opportunity to practice “loving the sinner, but hating the sin”—as long as that hate remains inside.

The principal task of a military chaplain is to provide pastoral care to service men and women of all faiths. If ministers want to evangelize, they should be called by a church, become a missionary, or get their own TV show.

As we prepare to honor our veterans on Nov. 11, let us remember that one of the freedoms that some have given their lives for is the freedom of religion. This is a comprehensive right that includes the freedom to have an unconventional religion or no religion at all. As Thomas Jefferson wrote in *Notes on Virginia*: “It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years.