

Religious Diversity in the Armed Forces: A Growing Equal Opportunity Challenge

by

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Abstract

Religion has been the subject of relatively little attention or research by Equal Opportunity specialists who have, instead, dedicated most efforts toward issues of race, ethnicity and gender. Changing religious demographics in the military and in American society in general, however, demand more and better information to support decision-makers as they reevaluate existing policies.

The changing religious demographics of the United States as a whole and within the Armed Forces in particular call for both greater awareness and improved information about religion for Equal Opportunity specialists and leaders at all levels. America is the most religiously diverse nation on Earth. In recent years, it has become even more diverse (Eck, 2001). As the military is a reflection of the society from which it is drawn, this increased religious diversity is also being reflected there (Elsasser, 1999). Growth in the numbers of Muslim, Pagan and secular/non-religious personnel in the Armed Forces may provide a basis to rethink a number of policies and practices. In any case, in order to better assess these trends and create policies to address them, officials and scholars in the Equal Opportunity field may want to explore improved ways for DoD to collect and analyze religious demographic and attitudinal data on the subject of religion. Better and more information is needed to effectively detect, eliminate and prevent religious discrimination in the ranks as well as to capitalize on the potential benefits that the new religious diversity brings.

Islam

The number of Muslims in the US Armed Forces has nearly doubled since Operation Desert Storm. In 1993 there were about 2,500 Muslims on active duty. By 1999 that number had grown to over 4,000 (Akhtar, 1998). This growth in the number of Muslims in the Services is likely to continue since a number of observers estimate Islam to be the fastest growing organized religion in the United States where, by some counts, the number of adherents is now approaching that of Judaism. A large part of this growth stems from the expansion of Islam among African Americans but there is also a substantial portion attributable to increased immigration to the United States from Islamic countries over the past decade. (Eck, 2001)

The Armed Forces have responded to this growth by appointing chaplains and building an on-base mosque. The American military's very first mosque was opened in Norfolk to serve the estimated 700 Muslims in uniform serving in the area. In addition, a private organization -- American Muslim Armed Forces and Veterans Affairs Council -- has been designated an ecclesiastical endorsing authority to nominate qualified candidates for appointment as Muslim chaplains. Out of the ten Muslim military chaplains currently serving the US Armed Forces, six are serving in the Army, three are in the Navy, and one is with the Air Force. In fact, these ten chaplains have established the Muslim American Military Chaplains Association and convened their first meeting in August 2000 to discuss common issues at the Graduate School of Islamic and Social Sciences in Leesburg, Virginia. (GSIS newsletter, June 2001) There is also a Muslim-American Military Association which includes members from every branch of service and has

been an active public voice on behalf of their constituents including participation in the case of *Rigdon v. Perry* on the subject of religious free speech by chaplains.

As the United States seeks to harness all available assets to fight the war on terrorism, the cultural perspective and expertise of loyal American Muslims will become an even more important asset. Muslim members of the Armed Forces will be particularly valuable in this regard. The Defense Department can strengthen this asset by continuing to deliberately foster a work and service environment that is both supportive and appreciative of Muslim soldiers, sailors and airmen.

Neo-Paganism

Another rapidly growing religious movement in the United States is Neo-paganism, particularly Wiccan religion. Gerald Gardner first publicly described Wicca in 1954 in *Witchcraft Today*. Adherents of Wicca describe their movement as the descendant of the pre-Christian indigenous religion of Europe, the remnants of which have over the centuries been referred to by the term "witchcraft."

The number of witches or Wiccans in the United States has not been thoroughly researched or documented. Reliable estimates place the number at between 750,000 and 1,000,000 which would make the religion about as widely practiced as Hinduism. Wicca has an extensive literature which sells so heavily that a Barnes & Noble executive has estimated the size of the market for Wiccan books to be about 10 million people (Eck, 2001).

Even in the absence of firm data, there is ample anecdotal evidence indicating a growth in the popularity of pagan religions among members of the Armed Forces over the past 10 years. A Wiccan "Open Circle" holds Pagan services for Army personnel on-base at Fort Hood and sparked a brief backlash by some fundamentalist Christians outside the military when their presence was reported in the media in 1999. A "Coven of the Dragon Warrior," named for the XVIII Airborne Corps symbol and composed of Pagan soldiers stationed at Fort Bragg has reportedly sought permission to worship on that post (Biance, 1999). A Wiccan Marine stationed at Cherry Point, North Carolina recently requested a court martial in lieu of non-judicial punishment based on his unique religious needs. He had been restricted to base subject to several exceptions including religious services. When he was charged with violating the restriction after leaving base to buy ritual items, he contended that he had not violated the restriction based on the religious exception (Talton, 2000). These are just a few instances which have appeared in the civilian news media over the past couple of years. Stories about Wiccans in uniform have also been reported in *Army Times* (11/11/97) and *Air Force Times* (10/26/87).

In fact, there are now 11 sanctioned Wiccan faith groups worshipping on military bases and naval vessels. This estimate comes from the Military Pagan Network, a private organization formed to speak on behalf of Pagan service members much as AMAFVAC and MAMA were formed to speak on behalf of Muslim service members. Unlike Islam and others, Wicca is not a centrally "organized" religion. Lacking a single central authority, the religion relies on several entities for representation. One of these, the Sacred Well Congregation of San Antonio presently supports Wiccan groups on seven different military installations (Biance, 1999).

The response to the growing numbers of Pagans in the Armed Forces has varied among the Services. In response to the news media coverage of the Fort Hood Wiccans, Army leaders publicly reiterated the policy of accommodating the religious needs of soldiers generally and not officially "recognizing" or endorsing any particular religion or religions. The Air Force recently made changes to MilMod, its new personnel data system, to allow Pagan airmen to specify "Wicca" or "Pagan" as specific choices in the religious preference field of the database. Previously, these options were not available for selection so that Pagan members of the Air Force could only identify themselves as "Other Religion" or "No Preference" or some other classification (Kennedy, 2001).

Extremism

While the military services may be officially tolerant and even accommodating of minority religions, the growth of these religions in the ranks may well attract criticism and even outright attack from persons both inside and outside the Department of Defense.

At both Fort Hood and Fort Bragg, civilian ministers of certain churches in nearby towns explicitly attempted to convince military leadership to curtail rather than accommodate the free practice of religion on base by Pagan soldiers. In one particularly notable instance, one Texas pastor reportedly said that rather than accommodate the Wiccans, the military should instead napalm them. To their great credit, military leaders resisted these outside influences and upheld their constitutional duty. In neither case, however, did the leaders or the military pagans seek to have these certain civilian churches designated as "extremist organizations" despite the fact that their actions could easily be interpreted as falling within the definition of such. According to DoD Directive 1325.6, "Military personnel must reject participation in organizations that espouse supremacist causes; attempt to create illegal discrimination based on race, creed, color, sex, religion, or national origin; advocate the use of force or violence; or otherwise engage in efforts to deprive individuals of their civil rights." If the growth of Pagan or other minority religions in the American military continues to evoke calls for suppression from the occasional civilian church group, commanders in the future may well find themselves in the very difficult position of having to determine that a nearby civilian church is an extremist organization and to treat it accordingly.

Within just a week of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center, the FBI was already investigating at least 40 cases of alleged retaliatory assaults and other hate crimes directed against Arab or Muslim residents of the United States (Millbank, 2001). While there were no known incidents of this sort within the US military, at least one Army officer had to make an on-the-spot correction and informally counsel a soldier who made unacceptable comments about the need to kill all "ragheads." Clearly, organized or disorganized hate directed against Muslim soldiers, sailors, marines or airmen could raise its head much as it has in certain instances with regard to Wiccans in uniform. Security personnel as well as commanders and EO advisors may have to be alert, sensitive and responsive to these new sources of extremism as well as the traditional ones.

Secular

There is a popular old axiom that there are "no Atheists in foxholes." This assertion is obviously not quite true. According to Defense Manpower Data Center statistics, more than 1,500 active duty military personnel are atheists and have overtly registered that fact as their religious preference in personnel system databases. Presumably, quite a number of them have, in fact, been in foxholes. One particular case in point was illustrated in the September 1989 issue of *The Humanist* magazine which carried an essay by Phillip K. Paulson entitled, "I Was an Atheist in a Foxhole," recounting his experience as a non-believer in combat in Vietnam. Atheist Dudley C. Gould likewise wrote of his experiences as an infantry platoon leader during the Korean conflict in his book, *You Tremble Body*. Beyond the written word, harder evidence can be found in the form of a granite monument to foxhole atheists. In a grove of trees overlooking Lake Hypatia, outside Talladega, Alabama stands a tall memorial obelisk on which is engraved, "In memory of Atheists in Foxholes and the countless freethinkers who have served this country with honor and distinction." The monument was funded primarily by veteran members of the National Freedom From Religion Foundation. Like the Muslims and Pagans in foxholes, military Atheists have their own private organization as well. The Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers (MAAF) was founded in 1998, maintains a web site and is led by an Army Sergeant First Class (Clark).

But even short of outright atheism, there is ample evidence that the American military is reflecting if not exceeding the clear trend in American society as a whole toward being less religious and more secular in outlook. Among the most profound changes in American religious demographics is the significant and persistent movement away from organized religion generally (Flynn, 2000). The proportion of Americans expressing no religious preference doubled from 7% in 1972 to 14% in 2000. (Salt Lake Tribune, 1/15/2000) Among people under age 30 – the segment of society from which nearly all military recruiting takes place – 20% say they have no religious preference (Mitchell, 1999).

In contrast, a far larger proportion – 16-24% -- of military personnel of all ages have registered "no religious preference" in the personnel systems of their respective services (Estrin, 2000). The percentage varies from service to service, probably for a variety of reasons. In the Army, 24% have registered "No Religious Preference." Why is this so much more prevalent in the Army than in society as a whole? Are soldiers lying in order to conceal their real religious preferences? Do they do this to avoid religious persecution? Are they merely indicating that they prefer to not have the military involved in their religious life in any way? Is there something about the Army that attracts more non-religious people than one finds in the general population? We don't know. Research in these areas has been inadequate to answer questions of this sort. One thing is certain however. The segment of the population who says they have no religious preference is growing in America and it is even larger still in the American military.

Implications

The implications for the Armed Forces as a result of all of the changing religious realities are immense. As a result, leaders may want to reevaluate their approach to religion in a number of different ways. The use of public prayer outside of strictly religious services, for example, may need to be reconsidered. In the aftermath of the *Anderson v. Laird* federal court case, it has

been unlawful since 1973 for the military to require its members to attend religious services (Benjamin, 1998). Still, exceptions can and do occur.

Presently, for example, while religious services cannot be made mandatory, current Army guidelines allow commanders to mandate soldier attendance at “ceremonies” even if they include prayers or scripture readings. Even if it is technically legal to do so, this may not be a good idea in today’s increasingly diverse religious environment. As more and more of the force is made up of adherents outside the Judeo-Christian religious mainstream, the likelihood increases that these practices will give offense to those forced to attend official duty gatherings which include alien religious elements. Such a situation fails to show consideration of others with respect to their beliefs and practices. More importantly, it may well be discriminatory or at least a violation of the spirit of Equal Opportunity rules. By being put in a position of having to ask to be excused from some business or ceremonial gathering in order to avoid having to act along with the public prayer, a soldier is forced to choose between an "opportunity" and his or her religion. This issue was specifically addressed in a recent Air Force Judge Advocate opinion that determined prayer at staff meetings, for example, to be ill-advised on both legal and equal opportunity grounds (USAF memo, 1998). The prudent choice for chaplains and commanders then, may be to restrict public prayer to those expressly religious services which personnel may opt to attend or not as they choose.

Traditionally, when a service member has a personal problem, the chain of command frequently refers him or her to the Chaplain. With the growth in the numbers of people in the Armed Forces who are outside the Judeo-Christian mainstream, there may be a similarly growing need for non-religious counselors to provide that sort of assistance to personnel uncomfortable being counseled by an authority figure of a religion to which they don't subscribe. There may be a new need to add secular mental health counselors or therapists to help troops deal with loss, grief, fear or other stress. One might even be able to argue that failing to make such resources readily available constitutes religious discrimination against Atheists and those who express no religious preference.

These trends in religious observance merit the serious attention of the Defense Department's Equal Opportunity professionals. Unfortunately the raw tools to study them are lacking. In general, DoD Equal Opportunity publications, studies and data sets have focused most attention and effort on the subjects of race, ethnicity and gender. Religion, in contrast, has been largely ignored, thereby leaving a significant gap in the understanding by both leaders and EO specialists about this form of discrimination.

Some basic religious data, of course, is available. The personnel system of every service has information about the religious denomination of service members. While this data is frequently used by chaplains and dogtag makers, it seems to have been largely skipped by the Equal Opportunity community even as a point of departure for further inquiry.

The Equal Opportunity Survey conducted by the Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) from September 1996 through February 1997 was a discrimination research effort of unprecedented magnitude within the Department of Defense. It contained 81 questions and was sent to 76,754 members across every one of the Armed Forces. None of the questions asked

about religious discrimination. Respondents were not asked their religion (DMDC Report 97-027). Similarly, the current Military Equal Opportunity Climate Survey (MEOCS) contains 39 questions. None of the questions ask about religious discrimination. Respondents are not asked their religion. What small amount of data collection there has been on this issue seems only to indicate a need for more in-depth study.

The Army Command Climate Survey is required to be conducted at the Company level within 90-180 days of a change of command and annually thereafter. Question 21 of that survey asks, "During the last 12 months, have YOU been subjected to discrimination in this unit?" Respondents are then asked to circle all answers that apply to them from a list which includes: "No"; "Yes, racial"; "Yes, religious"; "Yes, gender (sex)"; and "Yes, national origin." Because this survey is primarily a tool for commanders, there is no Army-wide compilation of the responses. In 1997, however, the extensive Army-wide Sample Survey of Military Personnel (SSMP) conducted annually by the Army Research Institute asked a nearly identical question and found that 2.2% of enlisted respondents indicated that they had been the subject of religious discrimination within the past 12 months (SSMP, 1997).

Two percent may not seem like much, but if true across the Armed Forces it would equate to as many as 28,000 uniformed victims of religious discrimination yearly. Unfortunately, the demographic portion of the survey did not ask about respondents' religion so it is impossible to correlate the incidence of religious discrimination to see if it occurred more frequently among religious minorities. Intuitively, however, this would seem to make sense.

Indeed, it is interesting to note that the percentage of soldiers experiencing religious discrimination and the percentage of all soldiers who have expressed a non-Christian religious preference are both a little over 2%. So, how many religious minority members in the Armed Forces are the victims of discrimination? Potentially, all of them! Or, at least, those who dare to identify themselves. Again, more data and more study are needed.

This brings up another issue. Religious minorities in the Armed Forces may even be more susceptible to discrimination than other minorities. Religious minorities tend to be quite small and, as a result, may tend to keep quiet and suffer discrimination in silence. With regard to Wiccans, for example, this phenomenon was even expressly acknowledged in DA Pamphlet 165-13 *"Religious Requirements and Practices of Certain Selected Groups: A Handbook for Chaplains"* (1990). It notes that, "Wiccans in the military, especially those who may be posted in countries perceived to be particularly intolerant, will often have their dogtags read 'No Religious Preference.' Concealment is a traditional Wiccan defense against persecution...."

In conclusion, scholars and officials should recognize the need for greater research in this area and expand efforts accordingly. To support and encourage this expanded research and analysis, DoD and the Services will have to expand efforts to collect data. Adding questions about religious accommodation, preferences and discrimination to the MEOCS, the Sample Survey of Military Personnel, the Command Climate Survey, and similar tools would be a relatively easy and productive place to start. Re-evaluating the options by which service members may express their religious preferences in the automated personnel data systems in each Service, as the Air Force already has done, would be another important step. With more

and better data about the religious attitudes of service members, commanders will be better equipped to make decisions about future policies and needs of the Armed Forces.

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