



Statement on Religious Free Exercise Controversies 7 January 2006

The MCA National Office constantly receives inquiries about religious free exercise issues in the military. One major interest is MCA response to the controversy at the Air Force Academy last year and the Air Force “Interim Guidance on Free Exercise of Religion” of 29 August 2005. The most frequent question is “Are chaplains being told not to pray in the name of Jesus?”

We direct such inquiries toward the responsible agents within the Services or Department of Defense. This is standard protocol. In Air Force specific issues, we believe that the Secretary, Chief of Staff, and Chief of Chaplains have the best data concerning relevant facts and decisions. We do point out to inquirers that the Air Force has been refining the draft guidance with careful regard for the religious free exercise of all its personnel.

With respect to the whole free exercise discussion and the particular debate on prayer, we are concerned about use of terms and placement of emphasis. We hear a lot of media comment about “chaplain rights.” For every right claimed there is responsibility. We don’t hear as much in the news about “chaplain responsibilities.”

Just how “free” is religious free exercise in the Armed Services? Is there a scale that calibrates extent or priority of free exercise when a conflict of belief, interest, or resources occurs? When there is a dilemma in the balance of chaplain religious identity with the rights and needs of the troops, who bears the most “responsibility”? Is it the chaplain? Or is it someone else’s problem?

Meanwhile, some Christian organizations with considerable media resources sounded the alarm. They contended that many - if not all - military chaplains are subject to a sinister, systemic oppression. One claim was “Chaplains are now forbidden by the government to pray in Jesus’ name.” They appealed for concerned citizens to voice objection to Congress or the President.

We certainly value “freedom of the press.” However, when such absolute statements and calls for emergency action appear, careful evaluation is appropriate. Before manning Battle Stations, we have a few crucial questions.

When did the Department of Defense establish a regulation that totally prohibits prayer in the name of Jesus? If the environment for religious practice of chaplains is so adverse, when did faith group leaders with authority to speak for their religious bodies take this matter up with the Department of Defense? If that happened and simply escaped notice, was every avenue of discussion and appeal exhausted? We note that the National Conference on Ministry to the Armed Forces recently sent a letter to the Secretary of Defense. This letter stated strong concern over the Air Force Interim Guidance and offered assistance to resolve issues involved.

For those with a stake in religious free exercise issues, we urge cautious response to the news along with continued vigilance. Such matters of essential liberty were seldom comfortably settled in the past so that we have no need for continued engagement in the present. However, the cause of religious freedom is better served when fervor is guided by all of the facts.

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What about chaplains who believe that they are unduly censored, oppressed, or punished for their religious beliefs and prayer practices? Have they verified their complaints as causes with their own faith group executives? Are they seeking redress of their grievances up the chain of command? If so, how far up the chain, step by step, do they choose or are they able to go? At what point must fellow chaplains join in and protest evident breaches of religious rights?

Bringing a military commander any bad news (much less one's own personal complaint) can be quite intimidating. Taking the next step to higher authority for review and further up the chain as necessary may be even more difficult. Yet - no matter how uncomfortable or inconvenient - the entire grievance process becomes part of the package the moment that any chaplain swears an oath of commission or appointment.

Sometimes "the bad news" is the very commander hearing from the chaplain. Former MCA Executive Director, G. William Dando, ran headlong into that situation onboard the *USS Vance* during Vietnam days. He wasn't challenging the CO for personal issues. Bill "took on the system" over deep concern for the welfare of his crew. Read *The Arnheiter Affair* by Neil Sheehan for more on Chaplain Dando's struggles.

Major General Kermit D. Johnson, a former Army Chief of Chaplains, was deeply concerned about the Reagan Administration's nuclear deterrence plan in Europe. In good conscience he could not remain silent. Rather than conflict with his duty to support the Commander in Chief, Chaplain Johnson retired early. Read *Realism and Hope in a Nuclear Age*.

Chaplains are not taken into the military as a privileged class outside of custom and regulations. This holds even when there may be clear evidence of unjust suffering for religious faith convictions. Our unique access to the chain of command at any level is nurtured in significant part through faithful adherence to policy and procedure.

In current free exercise issues we see substantial differences over the nuances and applications of important words like "free" and "responsible." The same is true for views on the military chaplain's role in carrying out denominational agenda. Considering the complex and marvelous diversity of backgrounds that chaplains represent, this should be expected.

We also see increasing focus on the rights of individual chaplains. Perhaps more discussion on this side of the equation has become necessary. But, caution is in order! Over many decades of service, military chaplains have been observed and revered as champions for "the Troops" - not for themselves. An enormous deposit of trust in and respect for "the Chaplain" goes before us down through a long line from the Continental Army and Navy to this very day. Opportunity for ministry to the spiritual welfare of Warriors greatly benefits from this legacy. In the current tempests, we do not see one good reason to squander such heritage and reputation.



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