

Religion Today  
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*Religion at the Academy*  
Paul V.M. Flesher

Last week the Headquarters Review Group assigned to investigate charges of religious intolerance at the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs released its findings. The 100-page report identified no systematic program of religious coercion or intolerance, but did see some violations by individuals and groups.

Having read the report, I think most problems stemmed from over-enthusiastic publicity or evangelizing by Christian students, staff or faculty. The individual incidents were frequent enough, however, to cause the perception by some non-Christians that the Academy was intolerant of their views and that their religious beliefs made them second-class citizens. Given that the freedoms the Air Force was created to defend include the freedom of religion, the report emphasized that religious freedom and respect needed to be more systematically practiced at the Academy.

The Air Force's policy on religion is to follow the principle of the separation of church and state. While many evangelical Christians dislike this principle, it is designed to protect their freedom, and the freedom of others, to worship and believe as they see fit. As it has developed, the principle holds that the government and government officials should not use the power of the state to prohibit or promote specific religions, religious beliefs or religious practices.

The principle began as a way to ensure that the United States would never have a state-sponsored religion, as did Great Britain, but has become a means of protecting each individual's right to believe and worship as they choose without government interference.

Since the Air Force Academy is a government institution, it clearly stands on the state side of the church-state divide. Legally, this means that it should not promote certain religious views or denigrate others, which its official policy recognizes.

In practical terms this does not prohibit students or employees as individuals from praying. It does not prohibit students or employees from getting together in groups to pray, worship or study religious matters, if they wish. In the circumstances at the AFA, it outlaws only one thing: the use of a person's superior position over a second person to coerce that second person to follow a religious practice or belief which they otherwise would not.

Since the Air Force is a branch of the military, its academy is inherently hierarchical. Not only are the staff and faculty officers (with a few civilians), but the cadets themselves have ranks, with older students given authority over younger students. For academy students, then, most social interactions are hierarchical, with someone who has authority over them or over whom they have authority. And, significantly, that authority is given and enforced by the government.

This changes the typical college experience for cadets, at least with regard to religious matters. At the AFA, a late-night bull session in the residence halls about religion -- a common event on every college campus in America -- has coercive overtones if held between a senior and a freshman.

If the senior should happen tell the freshman that he is "going to hell" if he does not agree with the senior's beliefs (another common occurrence elsewhere), the government-enforced hierarchy between the two cadets gives that statement an authority it would not otherwise have.

Furthermore, the faculty's power over cadets increases the potential for abuse of rank with regard to religion. Students worry enough about grades without having to be concerned about whether their religious differences with a teacher will result in a lower grade. Such coercion need not be implied or even intended to be effective and oppressive.

It is important that the Air Force Academy, as well as our country's other military institutions, be more sensitive about religious differences rather than less. Given the importance of unit cohesion to military performance, the Academy needs to teach its members how to deal with religious differences in non-coercive ways.

Perhaps the report's final recommendation identifies the way forward: The Academy should "provide continuing opportunities for all cadets to learn about, discuss, and debate issues of religion and spirituality in a developmental setting with peers and role models, as such discussion is essential to character development."