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## Air Force religion guidelines garner both praise & criticism

By Erin Curry Roach -- Baptist Press News

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COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. (BP)--The Air Force's latest effort to regulate the free exercise of religion within its ranks was met with mixed reaction as some conservatives praised new Air Force guidelines as a step in the right direction while others voiced concern that the guidelines still discourage the use of prayer in Jesus' name in public settings.



The revised interim guidelines, released Feb. 9, follow a similar set made public last August outlining the basic principles Air Force officials expect all military and civilian airmen to follow concerning the practice of religion. The guidelines were initiated by charges of religious bias at the Air Force Academy that emerged a year ago.

In response to the first interim guidelines, a contingent of 71 representatives and two senators had asked President Bush to issue an executive order protecting the religious freedom of chaplains in the armed services, saying "it is becoming increasingly difficult for Christian chaplains to use the name of Jesus when praying." But the White House did not act on the issue.

Air Force officials then made changes based on feedback from diverse groups and more careful consideration of the U.S. Constitution, but the most obvious change is the length of the guidelines -- from four pages to one in order to clarify religious respect issues with "leaner, broader verbiage," according to an Air Force news release.

"The basic intent of the guidelines has not changed from the first version, however, we found, with the assistance of internal and external feedback, that we could more effectively express them," Capt. David Small, secretary of the Air Force Public Affairs, said. "We've also changed language where comments indicated that the original language had been misunderstood."

Rabbi Arnold Resnicoff, a former naval chaplain who helped draft the revised guidelines, told Jewish Week that the bottom line has not changed -- clergy may not invoke the name of Jesus Christ while offering prayer at official government ceremonies.

The document does, however, say that the Air Force "will respect the rights of chaplains to adhere to the tenets of their religious faiths and they will not be required to participate in religious activities, including public prayer, inconsistent with their faiths," leaving room for some conservatives to hope that means Christian chaplains will not be required to abandon their practice of calling on the name of Jesus when they pray.

"This is an important move by the Air Force to protect the free speech rights of chaplains to pray according to their faith," Jay Sekulow, chief counsel of the American Center for Law and Justice, said in response to the guidelines. "We are delighted that the Air Force has clarified this issue and has moved to protect the rights of chaplains in a manner that is both appropriate and constitutional."

Sekulow added that he believes the guidelines should serve as a model for the other branches of the military. Focus on the Family also applauded the revision.

“If they are applied properly, they will safeguard the free exercise of religion guaranteed to all citizens, both military and civilian,” Tom Minnery, senior vice president of government and public policy, said. “... We hope these guidelines will bring an end to the frontal assault on the Air Force by secularists who would make the military a wasteland of relativism, where robust discussion of faith is impossible.”

Rep. Walter Jones, R.-N.C., who wrote the letter to Bush signed by members of Congress last October, said the new guidelines are a “step in the right direction.”

“I think more progress can be made in assuring that Christian military chaplains can pray in the name of Jesus Christ and all military chaplains can pray according to their faith,” he said, adding that he will work for further changes in the guidelines.

But others were outraged by the revision, including a former Air Force officer who said the military branch essentially fooled evangelicals into thinking improvements were made.

“These new guidelines are a sham, and they’re deceptive,” said Lt. Gordon Klingenschmitt, now a Navy chaplain who went on a hunger strike in front of the White House during the Christmas season to press for changes in the Navy’s policy toward free expression of religion. “They’re not new at all, and they still prohibit prayers ‘in Jesus’ name’ and authorize commanders to exclude chaplains who pray ‘in Jesus’ name’ solely based on the content of their prayers.”

Mikey Weinstein, an Air Force Academy graduate who filed a federal lawsuit last October to halt proselytizing in the Air Force, called the revisions “a terrible disappointment and colossal step backward.”

“The revised guidelines on religion released today by the U.S. Air Force are simply ‘dead on arrival,’” Weinstein said Feb. 9. “They blatantly fail to deal with fundamental issues -- namely the protection of the Constitutional guarantee of the separation of church and state, and protection for junior officers and enlisted airmen from coercive proselytizing and evangelizing by their superiors.

“... The Air Force has clearly demonstrated that it aims to pacify the Religious Right, even if this means turning a cold shoulder to the Constitutional law of the land,” he added. “The revised guidelines would seemingly allow for public prayer at mandatory military formations and, likewise, apparently establish the ‘special’ rights of chaplains to pray in the name of Jesus Christ at these same mandatory military formations. However, these confusing, internally inconsistent new guidelines provide no protection for the rights of those who don’t practice a majority faith and those who choose to not worship at all.”

Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League to fight anti-Semitism, also expressed disappointment in the guidelines.

“Taken as a whole, these revisions significantly undermine the much-needed steps the Air Force has already taken to address the religious intolerance at the U.S. Air Force Academy,” Foxman said. “Unfortunately, they reopen the door to the serious and prevalent misconduct which the USAF acknowledged and said it would correct. This is a lost opportunity to establish meaningful guidelines that would serve as a much-needed model not only for the Air Force but for all the branches of military service.”

Lt. Gen. Roger Brady, Air Force deputy chief of staff for personnel, said the interim guidelines are simply a proposal for the Air Force’s permanent policy and more changes could be made.

“This is an open and honest debate, so another interim period is appropriate prior to this [set of guidelines] being made the final version,” he said. “We’ll reach our goal for all Air Force members to understand their responsibilities as airmen and their rights as Americans. When coupled with respect for each other, the freedoms we enjoy strengthen our ability to perform our shared purpose to defend the United States.”

**Story Source**

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