

Press Release (12 Sep 05): **Can a Navy Chaplain Pray Publicly “In Jesus Name?”**

Marking an ironic departure from their supposed mission statement this week, the organization “Americans United for the Separation of Church and State” called for the Pentagon to punish military chaplains who refuse government censorship of their sermons and prayers.

Americans United spokesman Rob Boston, commenting on new Air Force guidelines that encourage chaplains to pray “non-sectarian” prayers, openly declared his disappointment that government punishments weren’t enforced upon the chaplains, saying: **“A section on the uses of ‘non-sectarian’ prayer is vague, and the document spells out no sanctions for those who violate it.”**¹

Navy Chaplain Gordon James Klingenschmitt, whose career is now in jeopardy, partly because he resisted government pressure and claimed a right to pray “in Jesus name,” responded: “Prayer is a very personal act of worship, and the government has no lawful authority to invade a chaplain’s conscience, nor force me to pray to a different god, nor punish me for refusing to pray ‘government-sanitized’ prayers. Nor can they discriminate by religious content, to punish religious diversity, nor exclude certain faiths from the public microphone. If they allow Non-Christian chaplains to pray at public ceremonies, they must allow Christian chaplains too.”

The Naval Chief of Chaplains, Two-star Admiral Lou Iasello, essentially agreed, publicly reversing his predecessor’s 1998 Navy policy² that pressured Chaplains to pray non-sectarian prayers, by telling the Washington Post: **“We don’t direct how a person’s going to pray. Because everyone’s own denomination or faith group has certain directives or certain ways of doing things, and we would never -- it’s that whole separation-of-church-and-state thing -- we would never want to direct institutionally that a person could or couldn’t do something.”**³

The Naval Chaplain School hasn’t yet implemented this new guidance from Chaplain Iasello, still teaching in mandatory “pluralism” lectures⁴ to all junior chaplains they should pray only to “God” and say “Amen” without including sectarian endings such as “in Jesus name.”

The Deputy Chief of Chaplains, One-star Admiral Robert Burt, concurred with Iasello’s new Navy policy on national television, recently telling The 700 Club: **“There is no prohibition on praying in the name of Jesus. We just ask our chaplains to use the wisdom God has blessed them with.”**⁵

But the new Air Force guidelines, which Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld hints will soon be mandated across all services, seem opposed to sectarian prayers: **“Consistent with long-standing military tradition, a brief nonsectarian prayer may be included in non-routine military ceremonies or events of special importance, such as a change-of command, promotion ceremonies or significant celebrations, where the purpose of the prayer is to add a heightened sense of seriousness or solemnity, not to advance specific religious beliefs.”**⁶

Retired Navy Chaplain Rabbi Arnold Resnicoff, hired by the Air Force to write their new guidelines, once compared Christian prayers ending with the phrase “in Jesus name” to the equivalent of anti-Semitic racism: **“Neither life nor prayer is that simple. Once we know that an action or a word hurts a neighbor, it is not a question of right and wrong alone...When someone explains to me that an offense is the ‘Christian’ thing to do, it is the same as a white man offending a black and then offering the weak apology that he had done the ‘white’ thing.”**⁷

Chaplain Klingenschmitt responds: "Rabbi Resnicoff's words are deeply hurtful. And I'm disappointed the Air Force would now let him enforce his faith upon all Christian Chaplains, using government power to censor, forbid, or punish our Christian prayers, in clear violation of the First Amendment and Title 10 of Federal Law. Please understand, I pray 'in Jesus name,' not to offend those who choose to be easily offended, but because I love God, and I simply want to obey Christ's teaching on how I must pray, as law allows, and my conscience dictates."

Jesus said in John 16:23, "Whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you," and in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."

US Code, Title 10 Section 6031 says: "An officer in the Chaplain Corps may conduct public worship according to the manner and forms of the church of which he is a member."

The pressure for Christian ministers to stop speaking 'the J word' dates back to the First Century. Acts 4:17-21 records the Pharisees conspiring, "'...to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn these men to speak no longer to anyone in this name.' Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, 'Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.' After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God..."

The US Supreme Court has already ruled that government censorship (or even guidance) of the content of any chaplain's prayers clearly violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. Their 1991 majority decision *Lee vs. Weisman* states:

"The government may not establish an official or civic religion as a means of avoiding the establishment of a religion with more specific creeds...The State's role did not end with the decision to include a prayer and with the choice of clergyman. Principal Lee provided Rabbi Gutterman with a copy of the "Guidelines for Civic Occasions" and advised him that his prayers should be nonsectarian. Through these means, the principal directed and controlled the content of the prayers. Even if the only sanction for ignoring the instructions were that the rabbi would not be invited back, we think no religious representative who valued his or her continued reputation and effectiveness in the community would incur the State's displeasure in this regard. It is a cornerstone principle of our Establishment Clause jurisprudence that it is no part of the business of government to compose official prayers for any group of the American people to recite as a part of a religious program carried on by government, Engel v. Vitale, (1962), and that is what the school officials attempted to do."

"I find it ironic," said Klingenschmitt, "that both the US Air Force and Americans United for the Separation of Church and State now call for the government to censor the content of a chaplain's prayers, when the Supreme Court already forbid that."

Americans United also recommended the government censor and punish Chaplain Klingenschmitt's sermons...

A front-page article in The Washington Post reported about Klingenschmitt:

"In July 2004, he was reprimanded for a sermon at the memorial service of a sailor who died in a motorcycle accident. The sailor, Klingenschmitt said in a recent interview, was a Catholic, 'and I had led him to a born-again experience before he died.'

In the sermon, he said, he emphasized that the sailor was certainly in heaven and 'mentioned in passing' that according to John 3:36, those who do not accept Jesus are doomed for eternity.

'My sermon was in the base chapel, it was optional attendance, and it was by invitation. If we can't quote certain scriptures in the base chapel when people are invited to church, where can we quote them?' he said. 'Don't paint me as a person who's going around forcing my faith on people. I've never done that.'

In March, Klingenschmitt's commander recommended against extending his tour in the Navy, writing that he has 'demonstrated recurring confusion concerning a chaplain's role within a military organization.'⁸

But Rob Boston of Americans United stated about Klingenschmitt's sermon:

"Amazingly, Klingenschmitt insists he did nothing wrong...A chaplain must be prepared to offer any religious service requested, or find someone who can. Clearly, some evangelicals are unwilling to do this and instead see their taxpayer-financed positions as launching pads for evangelism."⁹

"I wear a cross on my uniform," responded Klingenschmitt. "Is anybody surprised that sometimes I preach the gospel from the pulpit, during my optionally-attended chapel services? Shall we now deny our Sailors their right to a Christian burial, and a memorial that honors the same faith they personally believed? I find it oxymoronic that Americans United for Separation of Church and State now commends the government's efforts to punish a chaplain for quoting the Bible in the chapel. Perhaps their real mission isn't to separate the church from the state, but to abolish the church with government power! The Pentagon has no business following these people's *unlawful* advice, nor can they enforce a civic religion upon their chaplains."

A Navy judge will determine next month, whether to save Klingenschmitt's career. ☺

¹ "Air Force Action: New Religion Guidelines Issued" Rob Boston, Americans United Blog, 31 Aug 05, http://blog.au.org/2005/08/air_force_actio.html

² 1998 Navy Prayer Policy available at: <http://persuade.tv/againstgoliath/AppendixNAdmiralDirectsPrayers.pdf>

³ RADM Louis Iasello, "Military Wrestles With Disharmony Among Chaplains" Alan Cooperman, Washington Post, 30 Aug 05, pages A01 and A04.

⁴ Naval Chaplain School lectures at: <http://persuade.tv/againstgoliath/AppendixJTotalitarianPluralismLectures.pdf>

⁵ RDML Robert Burt, "Military Chaplains: In Harm's Way" Lee Webb, The 700 Club, CBN News, 8 Aug 05

⁶ <http://www.af.mil/library/guidelines.pdf>

⁷ Arnold Resnicoff, "Prayers That Hurt," Military Chaplains Review, Winter 1987, see http://www.resnicoff.net/PRAYERS_THAT_HURT.pdf

⁸ "Military Wrestles With Disharmony Among Chaplains" Alan Cooperman, Washington Post, 30 Aug 05, pages A01 and A04.

⁹ Rob Boston, "Evangelicals On The Rise: Military Chaplaincy Tilting Heavily To One Side," Americans United Web-Blog, 13 Jul 05, http://blog.au.org/2005/07/evangelicals_on.html