



# Religion & ETHICS NEWSWEEKLY

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**FEATURE:**  
**Military Chaplains Controversy**  
 January 20, 2006 Episode no. 921

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**BOB ABERNETHY**, anchor: Now, the flap over proselytizing by military chaplains and others in uniform. On one side are Christian evangelicals who insist they have an obligation to try to convert non-Christians; on the other, servicemen of other faiths, or none, who don't want to be proselytized or discriminated against if they're not evangelicals. Deborah Potter reports.

**DEBORAH POTTER:** At Dallas Theological Seminary, it's recruiting day.

**UNIDENTIFIED SERVICEMAN #1:** I'm a missionary for Jesus Christ in the United States military.



**POTTER:** Students at this evangelical Protestant seminary are prime targets for groups like the National Association of Evangelicals that endorse, or recommend, future military chaplains.

**UNIDENTIFIED MAN #1:** We represent -- estimated

around 30,000 churches, just over 30 denominations.

**UNIDENTIFIED SERVICEMAN #2 (Talking to Potential Recruits):** How does that make you feel, going into the coming deployment?

**UNIDENTIFIED MAN #2:** It's not going to be easy.

**POTTER:** The number of chaplains from evangelical denominations has grown dramatically in the past 10 years, and that's causing some turbulence in the military.

**UNIDENTIFIED CHAPLAIN:** Lift up your hearts.

**POTTER:** The U.S. Armed Forces have always had chaplains -- officers who care for the spiritual well-being of servicemen and -women and their families. Chaplains serve side by side with the troops in wartime, offering public prayers and private counseling to all comers, all faiths, believers and nonbelievers.



Reverend **EDWIN O'BRIEN** (Archbishop, Military Services, USA): Their first obligation would be to their own denomination, but the next obligation is to anyone who comes to them for spiritual or pastoral counsel.

**POTTER:** Archbishop Edwin O'Brien oversees the military's Catholic chaplains, whose numbers have dwindled even as evangelical Christians flocked to the chaplaincy. Historians say the trend dates back to the Vietnam War, when many mainline churches -- Catholic and Protestant -- were active in the peace movement, and evangelical churches supported the war. O'Brien says some evangelical chaplains are now telling servicemen that the only way to salvation is through Jesus Christ.



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Rep. **JONES** (To Chaplain Klingenschmitt): Hello, chaplain.

Chaplain **KLINGENSCHMITT:** Hello, congressman.

Rep. **JONES:** Good to see you, my friend, always.

Chaplain **KLINGENSCHMITT:** Thank you, sir.

**POTTER:** Klingenschmitt, a priest of the Evangelical Episcopal Church, says he was disciplined for some of his shipboard sermons.



Chaplain **KLINGENSCHMITT:** When the government says to me that, well, you can practice your faith in private but don't say the J word in public, because the Jesus word is insensitive, well, they're characterizing Jesus Christ as an offensive word. And

they're turning my Lord into a slur. Well, that is inherently offensive to me, and that is inherently discriminatory to people of my faith tradition.

**POTTER:** Not at all, says Barry Lynn of Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

Reverend **BARRY LYNN** (Executive Director, Americans United for Separation of Church and State): When you're hired as a chaplain, when you become an officer in the United States military, as every person in the military does, you give up certain First Amendment rights. But this is not fundamentally an issue of free speech. This is an idea of how the taxpayers are



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Rev. **O'BRIEN**: That is not accommodating the needs of others. Some people don't believe that, and it's not my position as a chaplain to require that of them. I must respect who they are and what they are. Some evangelicals have stepped over that line.

Professor **KRISTEN LESLIE** (Yale Divinity School): I think a lot of evangelical conservative Christians see that as the basic work that they are to do, is to bring people to Jesus. And that becomes a problem in a pluralistic environment where, because these are now employees of the government, you can't do that.

**POTTER**: The issue came to a head last year at the Air Force Academy, where complaints by Jewish cadets and others of proselytizing by evangelical officers and cadets led to a Pentagon investigation.



In response, the air force issued new interim guidelines telling chaplains to be "sensitive to those who do not welcome offerings of faith," and in public settings or where attendance is mandatory, to offer only brief "nonsectarian" prayers. That didn't sit well with some on Capitol Hill.



Representative **WALTER JONES** (R-North Carolina): Our men and woman in uniform are in Iraq and Afghanistan to defend freedom. And yet in this country we're having our chaplains being denied their freedom to pray in the name of their faith.

**POTTER**: Republican Walter Jones and more than 70 other members of Congress want President Bush to intervene, and more than 200,000 supporters have signed a petition seeking an executive order to protect the right of chaplains to pray according to their faith. Their cause célèbre is navy Chaplain Gordon James Klingenschmitt.

Chaplain **GORDON JAMES KLINGENSCHMITT** (U.S. Navy) (In Internet Video): My love for the Lord Jesus Christ is the reason I became a chaplain.

▶ CONTINUE TO TOP OF NEXT COLUMN ↪

supporting religion in the military and legitimate constraints on what those chaplains can do.

**POTTER**: That's not the only issue, according to Kristen Leslie of Yale Divinity School.



Prof. **LESLIE**: In a military environment, what serves the mission of unit cohesion, because that becomes central in a military environment -- good order and discipline and unit cohesion. Anything that works against that in a military environment should

be problematic.

Rep. **JONES**: What we are seeing happen -- I had a navy chaplain say to me, "From the Halls of Montezuma to the shores of political correctness, that's what this is all about."

Rev. **LYNN**: This is not about being politically correct. This is about being respectful of the fact that there are diverse groups of religious people in the military as well as many folks who have chosen no spiritual path at all and aren't interested in obtaining one.

**POTTER**: To Klingenschmitt, the real issue is his ability to practice his own faith.

Chaplain **KLINGENSCHMITT**: When I evangelize and I invite sailors to come and hear my sermons and they disagree, that's fine. They are never punished for disagreeing with me. But when I refused to practice the faith of liberal senior chaplains, I was punished with the full weight of the United States government. So who is proselytizing whom?

**POTTER**: For now, the air force guidelines for chaplains remain under review. The Pentagon says if they're finally adopted and they prove workable, those guidelines will become the standard for all branches of the military.



For RELIGION & ETHICS NEWSWEEKLY, this is Deborah Potter in Washington.

**ABERNETHY**: Last month, Chaplain Klingenschmitt went on an 18-day hunger strike outside the White House to protest the navy's restrictions on how he can pray and preach. He says the navy gave in, and he is now back at work. The navy says Klingenschmitt had been free all along to conduct Christian worship services as he chooses. But whenever it is a multifaith ceremony, says the navy, it asks that a chaplain's language be inclusive.

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