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The Jewish Week

SERVING THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF GREATER NEW YORK

(02/10/2006)

'Jesus' Barred From Air Force Invocations

Revised religion rules at Colorado Springs academy beat back GOP pressure.

Stewart Ain - Staff Writer

Despite strong protests by leading Republican members of Congress, the U.S. Air Force was expected to issue revised religious guidelines this week that continue to bar Christian chaplains from praying in Jesus' name during official government ceremonies and place restraints on Evangelical chaplains, The Jewish Week has learned.



Rabbi Arnold Resnicoff, special assistant for values and vision to the secretary of the Air Force and the chief of staff of the Air Force, helped draft the guidelines following complaints by Jews and others of proselytizing by Christian faculty members, officers and cadets at the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo.

"We're saying it a little bit better," Rabbi Resnicoff said of the revised guidelines. "We spoke with 200 organizations and leaders to see where the language could be read differently, and to make it clearer and succinct. I think we made improvements."

But the bottom line has not changed — clergy may not invoke the name of Jesus Christ while offering prayers at official government ceremonies, Rabbi Resnicoff said.

Rep. Walter Jones (R-N.C.), a member of the House Armed Services Committee who led a drive by 71 House members and three senators in opposition to that provision, upon being told that it was not removed, said: "To me, this is a sad day for First Amendment rights."

"For me this has nothing to do with Christian or Jewish or Muslim chaplains," he said in an interview. "I am just offended that anyone's First Amendment rights are being denied. ... I would fight just as hard if it was a Jewish rabbi who was denied his rights."

"Why should the federal government be dictating your thoughts and your speech?" Jones asked. "This is what seems to be happening. ... Chaplains are not free to pray their faith and their tradition outside of their church or synagogue. To me it is a First Amendment issue."

Jones went on to say that “political correctness can destroy anything.”

But Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, said the guidelines, which were drawn up in August, are not breaking new ground but rather restating traditional practice because of the proselytizing at the Air Force Academy.

“The Air Force Academy crossed the line with its ‘Team Jesus’ banner [placed in the locker room by the football coach] and saying that Jesus Christ is the savior,” he said. “When speaking [that way] to the student body as a whole, you are violating acknowledged, accepted parameters. ... Traditions were violated, and it was necessary to restate the understanding that the role of the chaplain is to minister to all.”

Foxman pointed out that chaplains are “allowed to minister to their own faith in their own chapel. So when it is said that their freedoms have been taken away, that is nonsense. But on the battlefield, a Catholic chaplain is not to administer Catholic last rites to a Jewish soldier.”

Foxman said that when he met with Air Force officials about the guidelines, it was his understanding that they would be implemented first by the Air Force and then be disseminated to the other branches of the military.

Capt. Matthew Bates, an Air Force spokesman, said it “remains to be seen if they will be implemented across the Department of Defense.”

In advance of the guideline’s scheduled release Thursday, Rabbi Resnicoff discussed them at a meeting at The Jewish Week. He said they had been boiled down to one page and that he would now concentrate on developing training manuals to help make it “easier to deal with complicated situations and to make sure the vision behind the guidelines is understood.”

“We are trying to balance the rights of people in the military with the rights of that uniform and the responsibilities that go with it,” Rabbi Resnicoff stressed. “It has been very difficult. This has not been a knee-jerk reaction but rather a sincere struggle to respect the rights of those who serve our country.”

Instead of using the name Jesus Christ, Rabbi Resnicoff said chaplains can simply say, “In Your name we pray.”

The rabbi said he had discussed the idea of not invoking Jesus’ name in public ceremonies with the head of the National Association of Evangelicals, which then adopted the idea in its “White Paper on Religion.”

Members of Congress also wrote to Pete Geren, the acting secretary of the Air Force, raising objections to what they understood to be a provision in the guidelines that restricted a “chaplain’s discussion with subordinate personnel.”

“Chaplains have a responsibility to care for the spiritual well-being of the entire Air Force,” they wrote, “which is not possible if chaplains are prohibited from initiating religious discussion.”

But Rabbi Resnicoff said the lawmakers misunderstood that provision. He said it would not apply “so long as one person does not work for the other or have power over the other ... and where there would be a reasonable expectation that reward or punishment was not linked to any religious decision or action.”

“In the guidelines we are dealing with limits on chaplains who believe they must evangelize and change [another’s] religion,” the rabbi said. “We are saying [that it is OK] if [the discussion] is voluntary. ... A chaplain must agree to support people of all religions. A chaplain dealing with others has to help them become stronger in their [own] religion. We say that before you become a chaplain, know the restraints.”

This guideline would apply to upperclassmen as well.

“If one cadet says to another, ‘My religion is the best in the world, you should convert,’ the other person has a right to say, ‘I don’t want to talk about religion,’ ” Rabbi Resnicoff said. “When anyone has power over another, we want to be sure that power is used to accomplish the military mission and never to coerce to change the religious beliefs of anyone else.”

“What we are trying to say with these guidelines is that if the conversation is voluntary and there is no power difference [in rank] and no reasonable perception that your reaction has an affect in the future, it should be allowed,” he added.

Among the changes that have been made at the Air Force Academy since charges of religious bias surfaced a year ago is one that now sets aside a block of time on Friday night, Saturday and Sunday for those who wish to attend religious services.

“On Sunday morning it was easy for cadets to go to chapel,” Rabbi Resnicoff said. “But to go on Friday nights you had to ask permission. In some cases they were told no, and some didn’t want the hassle of asking. Now blocks of time have been identified as worship time and cadets simply have to indicate which one they want to utilize for chapel services.”

In addition, Rabbi Resnicoff said that a major training exercise that in the past conflicted with Passover would no longer be held at that time.

“Now the master planning calendar has Jewish holy days listed along with others so that they know to avoid them,” Rabbi Resnicoff said. “And they have made it known that the rule about being allowed to wear a yarmulke with one’s uniform is known at every level. They found that a lot of the chain of command didn’t understand the rules that are

in place in the military.

“We say there should be a climate where requests for religious accommodation are welcomed. The guidelines are for all of the Air Force, not just the academy.”

The Air Force ban on the use of Jesus’ name by chaplains in official government ceremonies is also the practice in the Navy, according to Navy Chaplain Lt. Gordon James Klingenschmitt. He staged a 17-day hunger strike outside the White House last month to protest that policy.

“They wouldn’t let me pray in uniform in public ... [but] on Day 17 the Navy gave me back my uniform and they let me pray in Jesus’ name in front of the White House,” he said. “Two days later the chief of Navy chaplains changed the policy again and said commanding officers can censure or exclude us if we pray in Jesus’ name.” n

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