

## **Paganism, Religious Freedom and Officership: A Christian Military Perspective**

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Recent articles have highlighted the moral struggle faced by Christian men and women in the U.S. military. When the U.S. Air Force Academy established an official area for a pagan congregation, it aroused a wide variety of emotions—ranging from those who found the pagan belief system repulsive to those who felt anyone should be free to do as he pleases. Military Christians, too, experienced tension between the tenets of their faith and the dictates of their profession.

Following publicity surrounding the creation of the Academy pagan area, one commenter highlighted this very conflict when she said the Academy's actions were "great news" and showed "a willingness to be accepting of "other" faiths.

Is the creation of a pagan circle at the Air Force Academy "great news"? There are two distinct perspectives at issue, that of a Christian and that of a member of the military. Ultimately, they form the perspective of a military Christian.

### **The Christian Perspective**

For Christians, the news of the pagan area on a military installation is heartbreaking. Christians know there is *one* way to God and only *one* way to eternal life—through Jesus Christ. To see fellow Americans, fellow human beings, led astray into a false ideology that will lead to their eternal separation from God is saddening.

Let there be no doubt, the religious freedom protected by the Constitution guarantees the rights of one faith to disagree with another. Theologically, Christians are permitted to believe *and express the belief*

that neo-paganism is wrong or even evil, just as any other faith is free to hold equivalent theological perspectives about any *other*

competing faith. Still, despite the sometimes common negative stereotypes, believers in Jesus Christ want others to share in their joy and hope. When people actively reject what Christians view as a gift, it grieves them.

Thus, as a Christian, it is not "great news" that the U.S. military is facilitating the gathering of neo-pagans.

### **The Military Perspective**

Military officers acknowledge and protect the right of men and women around the world to participate in the spiritual beliefs of their choice. Our recognized human liberty of *religious freedom*

includes the provision of a dedicated space for a congregation of neo-pagans at the U.S. Air Force Academy. Under the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which military officers

swear to uphold and protect, pagans in America—including in the military—have their free exercise rights protected. (It is true the military is not obligated to create a congregation area for every conceivable belief system, but that is a topic for another time.) As noted at the time, it is great news that the American military is getting positive credit for its protection of religious liberties, something it is frequently (and falsely) accused of violating.

Otherwise, however, the report of the installation of a pagan area is not “great news” because such a statement would imply a positive value judgment on the subject of the report. Contrary to the implication in the original question, the U.S. military does not “accept” *any* faiths; it merely *accommodates*

them. Likewise, members of the U.S. military

*protect*

freedoms, they do not endorse or support the

*individual choices*

those freedoms may engender.

In an oversimplified analogy, Americans are free to smoke in this country (in some places). While at times a person may be obligated to support that choice enshrined in law, they are not required to “accept,” celebrate, or otherwise make a positive value judgment on the installation of a smokers’ pit in a pavilion outside a military unit’s back door. While they may acknowledge others’ ability to participate in such conduct, they do not condone, approve of, or support it. In fact, they may know, even if others refuse to believe, that their lives could be healthier if they made a different choice. To apply this example to the issue at hand, members of the U.S. military willingly protect human liberties even if they disagree with the actions people take as a result of those freedoms.\*

Thus, as a military officer, the creation of the pagan area is not “great news;” it is simply “news” that is consistent with military policy accommodating religious belief systems. Again, the positive portrayal of the military’s standard support of religious freedom *is* “good news.”

### **The Christian Military Perspective**

Within the military profession, Christians should always strive to treat everyone with respect, to act in a way that demonstrates the love of God, and to live a life of example and encouragement that draws men and women to Jesus Christ. [See the commentary, “The Witness of the Soldier Christian,” in the Spring 2010 edition of this journal—ed.]

Under current law, military service does not require a military member to support religious beliefs contradictory to his moral beliefs, including paganism. For example, it is perfectly acceptable for a Christian in a military Bible study to say another faith is a “false religion,” or to say adherents of a non-Christian faith will be subject to the wrath of God at the judgment. Those are religious beliefs American citizens—even those in the military—are free to hold. Religious adherents in our military are expressly permitted to conduct themselves within their faith activities as their beliefs require.

Even though members of the military have that freedom, there are obviously times when they should avoid asserting the moral superiority of their religious beliefs. A military officer can’t

always say “You need Jesus!”, even if he knows he is spiritually and morally correct. For example, standing in a group of mixed rank airmen during the duty day is not the acceptable time for a Muslim officer to announce that non-Muslims are infidels, nor for a Christian officer to declare that Islam is a false religion. There are times and places when such discussions are appropriate, as well as those when they are not.

While military members are not required to support religious beliefs contradictory to their own, they *are* required to support religious *freedom*. From an official perspective, support of that freedom does not equate to government endorsement of any individual belief system. The personal perspective is somewhat more challenging. If a military member—Christian, pagan, Muslim, Buddhist, or a member of any other faith—requests accommodation or assistance with spiritual needs, a military officer must honor his requests to the extent mission requirements allow, even if his *faith* is morally opposed to the tenets of that belief system. Under the protections of the U.S. Constitution and military law, a person in a military chain of command is obligated by his position to support the free exercise of service members’ faiths, even if those faiths are morally contrary to Christianity. Usually this would simply involve directing them to a chaplain, or acting on a chaplain’s analysis of an accommodation request.

A military Christian who feels he may someday be morally obligated to obstruct the exercise of a non-Christian’s faith, even if his motivation is the eternal disposition of that person’s soul, is not fit for a position of military authority. Within the context of military regulations, a military officer cannot use his authority to advance or restrict any religious faith.

Though not everyone will agree, a military Christian can fulfill his legal requirements of meeting the spiritual desires of his non-Christian subordinates or peers without compromising his faith. Whether it is excusing a Jewish soldier from formations on the Sabbath (when military necessity allows), finding a chaplain to help a Muslim find a Koran, or coordinating to find a place pagans can congregate, permitting those military members to exercise their faiths is not the same as morally accepting them.

Ultimately God has given men freedom, including the ability to choose their eternal fate. While governments and men can (and should) encourage moral *behavior*, the U.S. Constitution protects the right of men and women to believe as they choose. In addition, there are no Biblical examples of the followers of Christ enlisting the power of the state to control the faith of, or to convert, non-Christians. The Gospel was always presented as a choice.

A Christian is morally obligated not to actively encourage someone’s non-Christian faith. However, a Christian is not morally obligated to proactively *prevent* non-Christians from exercising their faiths. The fundamental paradox of human liberty is that men and women are *free*—even free to choose to be wrong.

## **Conclusion**

To directly answer the question, no, it is not “great news” that the U.S. Air Force Academy installed a dedicated area for neo-pagan congregation. It is the correct decision under the U.S.

Constitution, but it is a disappointing and sad commentary on the declining spiritual state of modern America.

Christians are saddened by those who are not only lost, but also facilitated in their spiritual confusion by the support of the U.S. military. Members of the military support the right of neo-pagans to have a dedicated site, but they do not find the creation of the site “great” because they do not support, nor are they obligated to support, the pagan belief system itself.

As originally stated, it *is* “great news” that some have given the U.S. military credit for being supportive of the spiritual needs of its members, regardless of their faiths. The reputation of the U.S. Armed Forces in America and in the world benefits from the accurate portrayal of its protection of religious freedom, not the inaccurate depiction of it promoting a specific faith. While this support for service members’ spiritual requirements has been the standard practice for some time, public misperceptions have caused some to believe otherwise.

As this topic demonstrates, as a Christian in the military you may experience tension between what you believe and desire to do as a Christian, and what you must do or say as a military officer. Current events assure us that there will be more incidents like this in the future. Some Christians cannot reconcile that tension, and the military may not be the best career choice for them. Military Christians who *can* stand for Christ in our world today, despite the tension, can be a potent salt in a unique and influential culture.

\*For those that do not catch the unspoken caveat, there is no Constitutionally-protected right to smoke.

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