

Atheists Contribute to Religious Respect at Air Force Academy

Last week, Jason Torpy, President of the Military Association of Atheists & Freethinkers (MAAF) represented atheists, Humanists, Freethinkers, and other nontheists at the US Air Force Academy (USAFA) for a two-day Religious Respect Conference. In a first step to move beyond years of religious disrespect at USAFA and elsewhere in the military, USAFA officials provided MAAF a seat at the table, ensuring for the first time that there would be direct advocacy for the underserved nontheist community.

MAAF entered the conference from a perspective of hope tinged with skepticism. Years of abuses with no repercussions for those who have violated religious respect combined with the prominent exclusion of Mikey Weinstein of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation provided a problematic history to overcome. In the first day, participants commonly confused atheists with Wiccans and a leader in the conference lamented the "secularization of America."

The conference itself was very positive, with open dialogue about issues combined with receptiveness to the nontheist perspective. Direct participation by senior officials, from the Academy and AF HQ, as well as the diversity of religious perspectives represented provided positive indication of Academy commitment to long-term, transformational change. While many at the conference entered with the idea that MAAF represented those who simply have "no belief," MAAF described the potential for a more valuable contribution: "Just as religious cadets become better leaders through their faith, nontheists use their personal values to focus and magnify their professional values." Atheists and Humanists do not simply desire to opt out of religious activities; they bring to the team a resilient and progressive life stance that builds a stronger military team.

Academy officials and attendees of the conference praised Mr. Torpy's contribution, inviting MAAF to contribute directly to the final development of respect training. In addition, two Academy chaplains attended a presentation by Mr. Torpy to Freethinkers of Colorado Springs, participating in question-and-answer and praising Mr. Torpy for positive and enlightening dialogue at the conference. MAAF efforts have already resulted in the change of one exercise and the removal of a poster exclusive of nontheists.

A full report on the outcomes of the event is available at the MAAF website. The report includes recognition that no training is completed or implemented. MAAF lists specific actions necessary over the coming months and years that will ultimately determine success or failure. The conference itself went very well, but years of effort are still necessary to overcome years of problems. The difference is that nontheists now have a seat at the table.

The Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers (MAAF) an independent 501(c)3 project of Social and Environmental Entrepreneurs. MAAF is a community support network that connects military members from around the world with each other and with local organizations. Where necessary, MAAF identifies, examines, and responds to insensitive practices that illegally promote religion within the military. MAAF supports Constitutional State-Church Separation and 1st Amendment rights for all service members.

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