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Atheists Reach Out to Chaplains for Understanding and Support

Senior officer talking to an atheist:

"So what do you think about the new stone circle for the Earth-Centered Religions?"

"You know atheist and pagan are different, right?"

"uuhh... really? Sorry. I totally respect those with faith or no faith."

"You know we have a well-considered naturalistic world view and human-based ethics that constitute more than just 'no faith.'"

"Really? That's interesting. Tell me more."

At the recent Religious Respect Conference at the United States Air Force Academy, November 15th-16th, I represented the Military Association of Atheists & Freethinkers. I had the above conversation, almost word-for-word, with at least five different senior active and retired officers. The responses were borne out of an honest desire for dialogue and carried no ill will. We atheists simply have a lot of work to do to better communicate who we are and what we bring to the table for military.

The need for personal support and an ethical foundation to strengthen our resolve in stressful situations is important for all service members. Chaplains are often (not surprisingly) unfamiliar with the nontheist perspective. MAAF hopes to be a conduit between the nontheist community and nontheist service members in the same way faith-based organizations are for their adherents, including, eventually, with the endorsement of chaplains.

Fears that atheists want to muzzle Christians, deny the opportunity to pray, or make the US an atheist nation, were prevalent during the conference. I hope I forestalled some of those fears. It is fair to say that MAAF sees an overt and coordinated effort by some groups to convert service members to Christianity. It also seemed clear that the attendees, evangelical Christians included, agreed that there should be boundaries on evangelism in the military context. A favorite analogy during the conference was the following: "an effort to evangelize a fellow service member should be approached and received like an invitation to a date." Don't assume everyone is interested, and stop immediately if there's any discomfort or rejection. Understanding the boundaries will be an important discussion, with mutual respect being our guide.

Similarly, from the nontheist perspective, we have a great interest in the principles and practices of religions. We study scriptures and rituals and moral codes, just as those of faith-based religions do. Outsiders may come up with conclusions about someone else's beliefs, e.g., "There are no gods," or "Atheists will burn in Hell." The conclusions should be to be honest and fair, understanding that the preservation of the collegial team culture is critical to mission success. That will be difficult, but "I'm offended" has limited utility as a response to honest dialogue. Again, mutual respect will be our guide.

Chaplains are invited to take advantage of our Chaplain Outreach Program to understand the terms, organizations, philosophies, and intentions of the nontheist community. That will allow the chaplaincy to provide critical services to what is now an underserved constituency in the military.

Jason Torpy graduated from West Point in 2000 and served with the 1st Armored Division in Iraq. 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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*For more information about this topic, contact Jason Torpy at MAAF (202)-656-MAAF (6223), community@maaf.info, <http://www.maaaf.info>
The Chaplain Outreach Program is at <http://www.maaaf.info/chaplain.html>*