



## MLDC Research Areas

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Legal Implications  
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Promotion  
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Implementation & Accountability  
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This issue paper aims to aid in the deliberations of the MLDC. It does not contain the recommendations of the MLDC.

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# Religious Diversity in the U.S. Military

## Abstract

American youth are more religiously diverse than their elders in terms of both nontraditional religions and nonbelieving, and religious diversity in the U.S. military reflects the youthful composition of the forces. This issue paper (1) examines the variety of religious identifications reported by servicemembers based on two different sources of data and (2) compares the diversity of religion found in the military with that found in the U.S. civilian population. It also considers the interaction between religious diversity and other demographic attributes of concern to the MLDC and reflects on policy regarding accommodation of religious requests.

The Services have wrestled with establishing a holistic approach toward their personnel that embraces human diversity without sacrificing traditionally high standards of character, obedience, unit cohesion, esprit de corps, and mission readiness. This wrestling match is perhaps nowhere more confusing or complex than when addressing the sacred and the secular.

Religious issues surrounding military service have made their way into the nation's headlines frequently in the last decade. In some cases, the military has been found lacking in support of religious groups in their midst, perhaps most notably in 2005 with the investigation of religious treatment of cadets at the U.S. Air Force Academy (Cook, 2007). Other cases have highlighted prejudicial actions or words on the part of individuals (rather than institutions), resulting in highly visible and often embarrassing controversies (Sharlet, 2009). These public embarrassments regarding religious diversity issues have led to dissension in the ranks, as evidenced by lawsuits filed in civilian courts on behalf of military members against the Services.<sup>1</sup> Religious diversity,

and the successful accommodation thereof, appears to be a critical component of removing barriers to successful service by minority members.

This paper addresses religiosity within the context of current diversity efforts. It is based on quantitative research conducted in August 2009 by the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute (DEOMI) that examined the religious self-identification, beliefs, and practices of military personnel. Increased awareness of religious diversity provides Department of Defense (DoD) leaders with information that may assist them in fulfilling their statutory and policy responsibilities to provide for and accommodate the religious practices of servicemembers.

## The Religious Identification and Practices Survey Study

The information presented in this paper is based primarily on the Religious Identification and Practices Survey (RIPS), a survey administered as Part B of the Defense Equal Opportunity Climate Survey (DEOCS) from July 1 to July 16, 2009. During this period the DEOCS was taken by 14,769 military participants, of whom 6,384 (38 percent) voluntarily elected to complete the RIPS. They did so with the assurance of complete privacy in their answers. Although DEOCS and RIPS participants were not a random sample of the population of concern, the demographic characteristics of those who took the DEOCS during this period closely match those of the force at large. In addition, no statistically significant variations, in terms of race, ethnicity, age, gender, or rank, were found to exist between those who took the RIPS and those who did not.

The RIPS consisted of 30 questions. Two addressed the respondents' self-identified religious affiliation, and the remainder addressed respondents' attitudes toward religion-related subjects and beliefs. Of those who completed the RIPS, only 0.25 percent did not provide valid responses regarding religious affiliation.

### The Religious Composition of the Force

Table 1 situates the RIPS results in the context of data supplied by the Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) and data from two recent national surveys of civilians. The data are divided into 22 groups that are based on traditional identifications and religious-study practices. The DMDC figures represent data collected from individuals when they first enter military service or on occasions when servicemembers voluntarily update their religious preferences in their personal information file. Therefore, the DMDC figures are administrative data, not statistics based on random sampling. In all four studies, the 22 groups were formed by combining individual responses into major groups of traditionally recognized denominations and faiths.

Overall, RIPS figures are consistent with those provided by DMDC, but RIPS figures provide greater precision and

figures. In every category, with the exception of *Other Christian* and *Data error*, RIPS reflects equal or higher percentages of servicemembers claiming a religious or Humanist identity than does DMDC. In effect, *Other Christian* and *Data error* in DMDC are reduced in size in RIPS because RIPS respondents indicated their preferences with greater precision.<sup>2</sup>

Compared with DMDC data, RIPS data reflect higher percentages of respondents who self-identify as Jewish, Muslim, Pagan, Eastern, and Humanist. In these categories, however, RIPS figures approximate two respected religious-identification surveys of the U.S. population: ARIS (Kosmin & Keysar, 2008) and the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey (Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life, 2008). In more-traditional Christian categories, RIPS reflects comparable percentages to those reported by ARIS and Pew. There is

**Table 1. Faith Group Identification from DEOMI, DMDC, the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), and the Pew Religious Landscape Survey**

Faith Group	DEOMI Totals	DEOMI (%)	DMDC (%)	ARIS (%)	Pew (%)
Adventist	165	2.77	0.34	0.41	0.5
Baptist	1,045	17.56	13.88	15.84	17.2
Brethren	16	0.27	0.04	0.0	0.1
Congregational	133	2.23	0.55	0.0	2.9
Episcopal	51	0.86	0.66	1.05	1.5
Evangelical	59	0.99	0.55	1.3	0.3
Lutheran	153	2.57	2.36	3.8	4.6
Methodist	220	3.70	3.61	4.98	6.2
Pentecostal/Charismatic	172	2.89	1.52	3.13	5.6
Presbyterian	100	1.69	0.93	2.07	3.0
Other Protestant	389	6.54	4.92	7.99	9.4
Catholic	1,197	20.11	20.22	25.07	23.9
Orthodox	24	0.40	0.11	0.64	0.6
Other Christian	195	3.28	19.56	9.7	2.7
Jewish	65	1.09	0.32	1.17	1.7
Muslim	27	0.45	0.25	0.6	0.6
Pagan	70	1.18	0.17	0.0	0.4
Eastern	52	0.87	0.42	0.86	1.1
Less common	71	1.19	0.62	1.23	0.8
Humanist	215	3.61	0.55	1.58	4.0
No religious preference	1,518	25.50	19.55	13.4	12.1
Data error	15	0.25	8.87	5.18	0.8
Total	5952	100.00	100.0	100.0	100.0

**SOURCES:** Authors' calculations based on Hunter & Smith, forthcoming; Defense Manpower Data Center, 2009; Kosmin & Keysar, 2008; Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life, 2008. **NOTE:** Total percentages of survey respondents claiming some form of Christian affiliation are as follows: RIPS: 65.84 percent; DMDC: 69.25 percent; ARIS: 75.98 percent; and Pew: 78.5 percent.

a gradual trend in the United States toward greater percentages of people claiming no religious affiliation, a phenomenon reflected in ARIS. This trend, combined with the younger demographic of the military in comparison with the population at large, leads to the religious-affiliation percentages reflected in RIPS.

The younger military demographic is also reflected in the *No religious preference* (NRP) category. Fully 25 percent of RIPS respondents claim this identification; the DMDC figure is 20 percent (see endnote 2 regarding differences between RIPS and DMDC); and ARIS and Pew report 12–15 percent for the overall U.S. population. This identification appears to be age dependent. Of servicemembers ages 18–30, 28 percent selected NRP as their religious identification, in contrast to those ages 31–40 (24 percent), 41–50 (16 percent), and 51 and older (10 percent).

Civilian surveys, such as ARIS, have documented the steady rise of the NRPs (often called *Nones*) during the past two decades, particularly among young adults (Dougherty, Johnson, & Polson, 2007; Kosmin & Keysar, 2008; Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life, 2010a). And although those who claimed some form of Christian identity constitute by far the largest single category (65.84 percent), the next-largest group of military members is NRPs (25.50 percent). This group is followed by the following separate Christian groups: some form of Catholic (20.11 percent) and some form of Baptist (17.56 percent). No other single category claimed a double-digit percentage, but the RIPS results indicate that the military contains nearly as many Humanists (i.e., Atheists or Agnostics) as Methodists (3.61 percent versus 3.7 percent) and more Pagans than Episcopalians (1.18 percent versus 0.86 percent).

### Religious Diversity Interactions

Table 2 compares the three largest groupings of religious preference (NRP, Roman Catholic, and Baptist) with respect to the percentages of enlisted and officer/warrant service-

members claiming these faith groups. The table further distinguishes between the age brackets of age 40 and under and over age 40. Compared with enlisted servicemembers, a significantly smaller percentage of officer/warrant servicemembers identified as NRP, and this difference is greater at younger ages. Baptists evidenced the same pattern, but the differences between officer/warrant and enlisted were less dramatic. By contrast, Roman Catholics produced a higher percentage of officer/warrant than enlisted in both the younger and older age brackets.

Overall, RIPS indicates that servicemembers in the senior ranks tend to be more religious. This finding may provide important insights with respect to retention and promotion of junior personnel who claim NRP. Servicemembers in the senior ranks, many of whom are motivated by religious principles, should recognize that significant numbers of those they lead may possess no similar tenets and should ensure that the work environment accommodates those unlike themselves.

RIPS also asked 28 questions related to religious beliefs and attitudes. These questions permit further investigation of religious diversity in the context of demographic diversity. Tables 3 and 4 report responses to questions dealing with the importance of religion in respondents' lives and the extent to which respondents are willing to work with people from religious groups other than their own.

Table 3 shows responses to the following question: How important is religion in your life? The results point to significant differences in religiosity in the military demographic groups, both within the military and compared with the overall civilian population. Female servicemembers tend to believe religion is more important in their lives than do male servicemembers, and black servicemembers, male and female, view religion as more important than do members of other races. These findings regarding female and black servicemembers are in accord with current civilian population surveys (Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life, 2008, 2009). With regard to Hispanic military members, however, the percentage

**Table 2. Religious Preference—NRP vs. Roman Catholic**

	Religious Preference (%)	
	40 and Under	Over 40
No Religious Preference		
Officer/Warrant	15.65	9.68
Enlisted	27.63	17.27
Roman Catholic		
Officer/Warrant	24.94	26.88
Enlisted	17.30	23.45
Baptist		
Officer/Warrant	14.97	18.28
Enlisted	17.34	22.94

SOURCE: Authors' calculations based on Hunter & Smith, forthcoming.

of those who believe that religion is important in their lives is less than that of the general population (Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life, 2010b), among whom 68 percent of Hispanics indicate that religion is very important in their lives. The discrepancy between military and civilian Hispanics may indicate a difference in (1) the segment of the Hispanic population that finds the military an attractive option for service and (2) the relative proportion of the Hispanic population that is eligible to serve.

Religious diversity may also relate to aspects of servicemembers' views of the religious climate in which they serve. All RIPS respondents recorded their agreement, indecision, or disagreement with the following statement: If a person is willing to deal with me honestly, I can trust them regardless of their religious beliefs. Results are shown in Table 4, but note the scale shown in the table is compressed from the survey scale, which ranged from *Strongly agree* to *Strongly disagree*. The disparities presented illustrate how servicemember attitudes differ based on religious preference.

Majority religious traditions (i.e., Methodist, Roman Catholic, Other Protestant, Pentecostal/Charismatic, Evangelical, and Baptist) tend overwhelmingly to agree that they can trust those holding differing religious beliefs; indeed, with the exception of Evangelicals, few were in disagreement. Respondents identifying themselves as NRP agreed with the statement to a much lesser extent and disagreed at nearly twice the rate of those in majority religions, although not as strongly as did Evangelicals. Comparatively more Humanists agreed

with the statement than did those who identified with majority religions or NRPs, but they also disagreed by a larger percentage than did those who identified with majority religions, indicating a greater degree of polarization on this question. Adventists, whose long history of conscientious objection and unorthodox religious practices (e.g., Saturday Sabbath, dietary standards) distinguish them from members of majority religions, indicated an even higher rate of disagreement than NRPs, but their rate of disagreement was not as high as that of the Evangelicals.

### Accommodation to Religious Diversity

Diversity may offer a way to look at the tendency among NRPs, Evangelicals, Humanists, and Adventists surveyed (compared with members of majority religions) to trust to a lesser extent those from differing religious traditions. The greater levels of doubt among these four groups may reflect discrimination that these groups have faced from members of the dominant religious culture, both in civilian life and within the U.S. military.

Perceptions of religious discrimination have occasioned legal action against the armed forces. In 2008, for example, an atheist soldier filed suit against DoD, alleging discrimination directed toward him by Christians offended by his disbelief, his unwillingness to participate in public prayers, and his desire to hold meetings with fellow military atheists (Kaye, 2008; Blumner, 2008). Another atheist soldier filed suit,

**Table 3. How Important Is Religion in Your Life?**

	Very Important	Important	Moderately Important	Of Little Importance	Unimportant
Race and Ethnic Origin					
White non-Hispanic					
Male	23.88	18.25	26.47	13.17	18.22
Female	27.69	21.98	25.71	12.09	12.53
Black non-Hispanic					
Male	49.02	21.94	18.76	3.93	6.35
Female	61.36	21.36	10.45	4.55	2.27
Asian non-Hispanic					
Male	32.57	21.71	21.71	11.43	12.57
Female	32.26	32.26	22.58	6.45	6.45
Other non-Hispanic					
Male	25.71	24.57	24.57	14.29	10.86
Female	40.54	18.92	27.03	8.11	5.41
Hispanic					
Male	29.73	22.6	25.34	9.45	12.88
Female	35.22	23.27	27.67	6.29	7.55

**SOURCE:** Authors' calculations based on Hunter & Smith, forthcoming.

**NOTE:** Race and ethnic origin categories accord with those presented in Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2009.

insisting that the delivery by his unit chaplain of sectarian prayers at mandatory formations effectively forced religion on him in violation of his rights under the First Amendment.<sup>3</sup> Evangelical Christians have also complained of prejudice. For example, a group of Evangelical military chaplains claimed that proposed restrictions on the use of sectarian language in public prayers, particularly at mandatory formations, constituted unwarranted institutional restriction on their freedom of speech (Shane, 2008). Although the evidence gained from RIPS is not conclusive, the levels of distrust among service-members, as evidenced in Table 4, indicate that more investigation on the part of military leaders may be needed to ameliorate instances of religious discrimination, perceived and actual, that occur within their units.

Perceptions of religious discrimination may also arise with respect to granting religious accommodations for apparel, practice, and personal grooming. In 1996, addressing religious apparel specifically, Congress provided a general rule, declaring that “a member of the armed forces may wear an item of religious apparel while wearing the uniform of the member's armed force” (10 USC 774). The law provides for two exceptions to this provision: first, if the apparel in question would interfere with the member’s military duties and, second, if the apparel is not neat and conservative. The DoD implementing instruction defines neat and conservative as items that (1) are discreet, tidy, and not dissonant or showy in style, size, design, brightness, or color; (2) do not replace or interfere with the proper wear of any authorized article of the uniform; and (3) are not temporarily or permanently affixed or appended to any authorized article of the uniform (DoD Instruction 1300.17).

The implementing instruction also tightens the standards for approval of requests to wear religious items to situations in which “accommodation will not have an adverse impact on mission accomplishment, military readiness, unit

cohesion, standards, or discipline,” and it indicates that such requests should be made individually and be considered at the command level (DoD Instruction 1300.17, paragraph 4). Before approval or rejection of such requests, the instruction recommends that commanders take into account several distinct factors, including (1) the religious importance of the accommodation to the requester, (2) the cumulative impact of repeated accommodations, (3) and alternative means to meet the requested accommodation (DoD Instruction 1300.17, enclosure, paragraph 1). This recommended procedure requires individual commanders to weigh and make decisions about complex theological and praxis issues in a highly diverse environment.

Does the DoD instruction place an undue burden on commanders? These men and women receive no formal instruction in comparative religions or in the sociology or history of religion. This sets up the possibility that even the most fair-minded commanders may approve religious-accommodation requests with which they are reasonably comfortable or familiar but may not approve those with which they are uncomfortable or unfamiliar. Thus, in seeking protection from accusations of favoritism and capriciousness, some commanders may adopt the seemingly safe policy of uniformity: i.e., rejecting all (or most) requests on the basis that any approval would impair mission accomplishment by degrading unit esprit de corps. Dissenting in a landmark case involving the military and religious headgear, Supreme Court Justice William J. Brennan, Jr. commented on this tendency, writing, “[T]he military, with its strong ethic of conformity and unquestioning obedience, may be particularly impervious to minority needs and values.”<sup>4</sup>

A recent accommodation ruling illustrates some of these points. Army policy since 1981 has prohibited its uniformed members from having a beard and wearing a turban over unshorn hair, all three of which are religiously mandated

**Table 4. Willingness to Work with Religious “Others”**

Q27. If a person is willing to deal with me honestly, I can trust them regardless of their religious beliefs.

	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
Methodist	77.27	20.91	1.82
Roman Catholic	70.14	26.43	3.44
Other Protestant	78.66	17.22	4.11
Pentecostal/Charismatic	78.49	16.86	4.65
Baptist	70.72	24.4	4.88
Humanist	80.00	13.49	6.51
NRP	54.94	36.76	8.30
Adventist	59.39	31.52	9.09
Evangelical	79.66	10.17	10.17

**SOURCE:** Authors’ calculations based on Hunter & Smith, forthcoming.

grooming or apparel practices for baptized Sikh men. Several years ago, however, the recruiting command allowed two Sikh doctors-in-training to retain their religious distinctiveness when they were commissioned and while they underwent basic and follow-on training. When their medical training neared completion, however, both faced the requirement to conform to standard Army grooming and apparel policies. The Army Deputy Chief of Staff, stepping into what had quickly evolved into a public controversy, approved the requests of both men to be granted an exception to policy during their current assignments. When they transfer or are deployed, their pursuit of the grooming and apparel exceptions will collide with a 23-year history of accommodation denial.

## Conclusion

Given its young demographic, the military appears to reflect the religious diversity of U.S. society closely in terms of identification with minority faiths, identification with possessing no religious preference, and identification with groups traditionally considered outside the religious mainstream (e.g., Pagan, Eastern, Humanistic, and so on). In other words, religious diversity in the military parallels that of the civilian population, including the greater religious diversity of its youth.

The Millennial generation, which constitutes the focus of the military's current recruiting and retention efforts, is the most ethnically and racially diverse cohort in the nation's history (Keeter & Taylor, 2009). Its diverse religious beliefs and practices may differ from those commonly understood and accepted by the military's majority culture, and it demonstrates increased tolerance of religious difference (Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life, 2010b).<sup>5</sup> Ad hoc and nonstandard approaches to requests for religious accommodation may have a deleterious effect on the quality of service of members from non-majority religions, and they may be viewed as unacceptable by an important segment of the military, the members of the Millennial generation. For example, as implemented, current DoD policy regarding wearing items of religious apparel while in uniform leads to nonstandard approaches to religious accommodation by directing that all requests for accommodations devolve to individual military commanders. Such devolution reinforces deterrence of religious accommodations and may be at cross-purposes with the range of religious diversity found in today's U.S. military.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Of the many such lawsuits, the following are among the most notable and contentious: *Mellen v. Bunting*, 327 F.3d 355 (4th Cir. 2003) (mandatory mealtime prayers at the Virginia Military Institute are unconstitutional); *Anderson v. Laird*, 466 F.2d 283 (D.C. Cir. 1972) (mandatory chapel attendance at the U.S. Naval Academy is unconstitutional); *Goldman v. Weinberger*, 475 U.S. 503 (1986) (the military may regulate religious apparel); *Rigdon v. Perry*, 962 F. Supp 150 (D.D.C. 1997) (religious speech of chaplains, in worship settings, may not be regulated). The cases that follow involve assertions on the part of Evangelical Navy chaplains that the Navy deliberately discriminates against them in favor of chaplains from liturgical faith groups: *Veitch v. England*, 471 F. 3d 124 (D.C. Cir. 2006);

*Chaplaincy of Full Gospel Churches v. England*, 454 F.3d 290 (D.C. Cir. 2006); *In Re: England*, 375 F.3d 1169 (D.C. Cir. 2004), cert. denied 543 U.S. 1152 (2005); *Larsen v. U.S. Navy*, 486 F. Supp. 2d 11 (D.D.C. 2007); *Adair v. England*, 417 F. Supp. 2d 1 (D.D.C. 2006).

<sup>2</sup>Differences between DMDC and RIPS may be due to the different methods used in these two data-collection efforts. The confidentiality afforded to RIPS respondents combined with the likelihood that RIPS respondents, all of whom are active-duty personnel beyond military occupational specialty or A School training, feel more settled and secure within the military environment than they did upon entry and, consequently, possess a greater degree of self-confidence, may have fostered greater openness and, thus, a more accurate disclosure of their religious affiliation. This stands in contrast with DMDC respondents, the vast majority of whom are recruits providing such information in the stressful environs of a Military Entrance Processing Station. For more information see Hunter and Smith (forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup>His lawsuit was dismissed for failure to exhaust administrative remedies. *Chalker and Military Religious Freedom Foundation v. Gates*, No. 2:08-cv-02467, Memorandum and Order (D.Kan. Jan. 7, 2010); Milburn, 2010.

<sup>4</sup>*Goldman v. Weinberger*, 475 U.S. 503, 524 (1986) (Brennan, J., dissenting).

<sup>5</sup>Millennials are less religiously affiliated than previous generations of Americans but remain fairly traditional in their views of heaven and hell, life after death, and other religious beliefs. They are more accepting of homosexuality and evolution than older Americans even as they are more comfortable with churches' involvement in politics and the government's involvement in protecting morality. In being both more comfortable with racial and ethnic diversity and less supportive of traditional religious institutions, Millennials may continue to challenge current thinking on the role of religion in public life.

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