

Review of USAFA Religious Respect Conference

Review prepared by Jason Torpy, President, MAAF, November 21, 2010

Conference conducted November 15-16th, 2010 by the United States Air Force Academy

November 15th and 16th, 2010 opened a new chapter in the acceptance by the military of nontheists. The Military Association of Atheists & Freethinkers (MAAF), a community organization that supports atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers, and other nontheists, was invited to help reform religious respect at the Air Force Academy. In the past, ignorant service members have denied that there are atheists in foxholes. Fewer than ten years ago, official policy authorized proselytism of the "unchurched," which directly excluded atheists from Equal Opportunity protections. A scandal at the Air Force Academy in 2005 brought to light wide-ranging Dominionist Evangelical proselytism. The Air Force Academy, in an effort to leave behind a troubled past, made the unprecedented move to invite atheists to the table.

Because of the history within the military as a whole and the Air Force Academy specifically, excitement at this invitation has been tinged with skepticism. The Academy might invite an atheist organization to simply rubber-stamp the status quo. There may be a focus on change in the future without any desire to face up to the problems of the past. These concerns were founded primarily on the sheer volume of problems in the past as well as the continuing complaints and fear still coming from the Academy. In addition, the meeting was focused specifically on cadet training, primarily the freshmen, with no focus (at this time) on faculty or staff. Coming into the meeting, the Military Religious Freedom Foundation (MRFF) was excluded, which meant that one of the most critical advocates for change could not directly represent their clients. Even with the best turnout, two days cannot roll back years of problems and abuses. Bringing these concerns, MAAF came with the sincere hope that USAFA was truly dedicated to change.

Before the meeting, MAAF was provided some of the documents to be used in the meeting, including training materials. The primary focus of the conference was the review and discussion of religious respect training for cadets. Training constituted two one-hour sessions for freshmen including a number of related decision toolkits and scenarios. The training was positive overall, highlighting the problems proselytism can create within a unit as well as the value of the nontheistic perspective. The full review of those documents can be found on the MAAF website, but there were a number of primary concerns. The first was that the Free Exercise clause of the 1st Amendment seemed to be over-emphasized, while the importance of the Establishment clause was marginalized. The second major issue was that the scenarios had insufficient clarity on what should be the proper response to issues, suggesting instead that cadets should be trusted to come to the correct response. The third problem was an activity that required cadets to self-identify their religion and stand in groups. The intention was to show diversity, but this activity would instead cause an uncomfortable situation and promote separation rather than unity. These were presented approximately ten days in advance publicly at the MAAF website, allowing for full review and a first opportunity to show responsiveness to our perspective. The first change in the training was to eliminate the problematic exercise grouping individuals in self-identified faith groups. This was changed in advance of the conference in favor of spectrum of less to more "spiritual." While spirituality is, in common

translation, a supernatural concept problematic to those with a naturalistic perspective, the spectrum is an improvement over groups. This also promotes dialogue on what is an increasing prevalence of "spirituality" as a dimension of character development (more to follow on that). During the conference, there was also general agreement that, while Free Exercise may take up most of the chaplains' daily activities, Establishment is of equal importance. There was agreement that the training could be reworded to better communicate the equality of the two 1st Amendment clauses. In addition, there was agreement that 'correct' solutions for the sender, receiver, bystanders, and leaders in different scenarios should be covered in more detail. USAFA and Conference attendees responded at least in part to all of MAAF's major suggestions, and MAAF has accepted an invitation to be directly involved in the development of training in the next few months.

Aside from the specific training aspects, the conference itself had a focus on long-lasting and transformational change. In attendance were very senior representatives from the Secretary of the Air Force, Air Force Chief of Staff, and Air Force Chaplains College. The Superintendent, Lieutenant General Michael Gould, and all of the top chaplains at the Academy were directly involved for the majority of the conference. The Dean and Commandant of Cadets (both Generals) and the senior enlisted member of the Academy were in attendance for a significant portion of the event. For those not familiar with the military, there are few activities that draw this level of senior officer participation. MAAF was able to build positive relationships and hopes to take advantage of invitations for further dialog with senior officials create tangible change in the military religious culture.

The diversity of representatives also constituted a positive indicator of the success of the event. Four advocacy and oversight organizations, and 11 religious community representatives, including the nontheist community were in attendance. Muslim representatives were invited but could not attend. Cadet members of the Academy Interfaith Council, including Protestant, Atheist, Buddhist, and Jewish members, were afforded time to attend the majority of the event. MRFF was unfortunately excluded from the event, which was left out a major critic representing scores of Academy cadets, faculty, and staff. Critics of Academy climate including the Military Association of Atheists & Freethinkers and the Interfaith Alliance as well as cadets and faculty in attendance stepped in to bridge this gap. Academy officials as well as attendees stated that MRFF concerns were valid areas of concern, but that the tone MRFF uses would not be a good fit for this type of event. Without overlooking the exclusion of MRFF, the broad diversity of representatives set a great precedent for future events.

Participants showed great receptiveness to the nontheist community. There were a few honest misunderstandings that the future inclusion of nontheists will eventually be able to resolve. No fewer than five attendees of the conference (despite being senior leaders and chaplaincy representatives) had no idea that pagan and earth-centered religions are different than the atheist/nontheist philosophies. In each case the confused individual was abashed by the mistake and asked for more information about nontheist beliefs. A more troubling incidence was when one leader's opening remarks lamented the "secularization of America" and implied that internet porn was a primary objective of the secular community. This was understandably offensive to all of the atheists in attendance, but the speaker is not identified here because the issue has been addressed. Because we were invited into the event, there was an opportunity to resolve the issue on a personal rather than media or legal level. One of the best outcomes of the conference was a better understanding among all attendees of how a naturalistic and

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humanistic philosophy provides a solid foundation for character and leader development, just as traditional faith does. What we bring is not simply "no faith" or "non-belief" but rather deep convictions, sound ethics, and a strong community. Rather than being confrontational, the attendees drew from diversity to build understanding and to find opportunities for collaboration.

The idea of mutual religious respect is important and allowed us to highlight, if not resolve, a number of key points. From the perspective of MAAF, the key conflicts are the desire of Evangelical Christians to share their faith, i.e., to proselytize, in a government/military context and the desire of nontheists to be understood and accepted as equals in the community. Atheists, Humanists, and other nontheists feel like second-class citizens when leadership, patriotism, or ethics are presented in a faith-based fashion. When major events are begun and ended with prayer, even non-sectarian prayer, we see theistic views given preferential treatment over nontheism. When nontheists engage in comparative and critical analysis of religion, often coming to conclusions that question the truth and/or morality of some religious beliefs, we are told that we cannot 'denigrate' religion because it is disrespectful. It is considered acceptable for religious groups to declare that atheists are fools or that we believe nothing, that a monotheistic god is the only source of ethics, and that those who don't adopt certain beliefs are deserving of eternal torture. There exists an opportunity to increase understanding and freedom on both sides, especially with respect to discussion of religion, including limited evangelistic activities and the comparative and critical analysis of religion.

A few specific opportunities that we hope to address at the Academy relate to the SPIRE program. SPIRE is Special Programs in Religious Education, and allows for external organizations to access Academy resources and cadets to help provide for their religious practices. This program has improved the opportunity for a variety of organizations to engage in religious practices. The Buddhists have been provided a beautiful and serene sanctuary within the Cadet Chapel. The Earth-Centered cadets (pagan/Wiccan) have been provided a ceremonial rock circle for their activities. These accommodations are a testament to the successes of the SPIRE program, but there is room to improve.

There is a concern regarding powerful external organizations that promote a level of proselytism that is contrary to good order and discipline within the military. These organizations have mission statements, tactics, and training promoting the conversion of others as a primary goal. These organizations, to the extent they abide by the rules of the program and mission of the Academy should be welcome. However, due to their stated purposes, they warrant additional oversight. Specifically, MAAF has asked that the SPIRE Memorandum of Understanding be updated to explicitly prohibit unwanted attempts to convert others (i.e., proselytism or evangelism). We also ask that a current prohibition against denigrating religion be clarified to include comparative and critical analysis of religion. The Freethinkers group is not currently within the SPIRE program primarily because their honest study of other religious organizations is not well provided-for within the SPIRE program. These reforms clarifying the boundaries of proselytism and study of other religions will allow SPIRE to take the next step in mutual religious respect.

As we move into the future, we will not forget those involved in issues of the past. Chaplain MeLinda Morton was a key whistleblower and was fired. She has since moved on with life, but hers was a promising career lost. Then Brigadier General Johnny Weida, Commandant and

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source of many problems of the Academy religious scandal in 2004-2005, was promoted and now serves on staff at Air Force Headquarters. Then Lieutenant General John Rosa was Superintendent and ultimately responsible for the climate at the Academy. He is now President of the Citadel, another premiere military academy. Fisher DeBerry, coach of the football team had a clear evangelistic agenda and continued in his position until retiring. There is no evidence of any prosecution beyond private discussions. These are only a few examples, but they are very prominent in the mind of those who are deciding whether to abide by policies or to violate policies. When violations occur, victims look at these examples of un-punished violators and may choose not to speak or to be anonymous. Without tangible consequences for those who violate policies, there is little incentive to abide by policy and disincentive to speak out about violations.

The USAFA Religious Respect Conference combined diverse outreach and engagement with senior command involvement to provide a foundation for a positive future. A two-day event is overshadowed by a long history of failures. Moving forward, we may see success or failure. Within the next few months, we should see a finalization of new training with a new perspective. Over the next two years, we should see Implementation of training and public feedback from cadets, comprehensive training for staff and faculty, and a major improvement in the culture in the next USAFA Climate Survey. Updated SPIRE regulations restricting individual and organizational attempts at conversion as well as allowance for critical discussions about religion will allow for a reconciliation of cadet Freethinkers with SPIRE. The first step for SPIRE and respect training is to create clear definitions of "proselytism" and "respect." Given a continuing pressure to see measurable change in the command climate, this conference can be seen, in hindsight, as a new beginning.