

THE MILITARY, RELIGION, AND MENTAL HEALTH

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I'm convinced that the military environment stands in naked violation of what is meant by the separation of church and state.

-- A Retired Military Chaplain

At a 2005 meeting Michael McLendon, a top official in the Veterans Administration, repeatedly pounded a table on which his Bible was placed. He was complaining that veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) were "costing us too much money," that the diagnosis was "made up," and that if the veterans "believed in God and country . . . they would not come home with PTSD."

This is just one instance of far too many conservative Christian intrusions into the U. S. military. There was the "Team Jesus" banner hanging in the locker room of the Air Force Academy football team, and the spokesman for Campus Crusade's Military Ministry saying that Christian soldiers were "government paid missionaries." In Afghanistan overzealous soldiers were prevented at the last minute in their plans to distribute Bibles because of a military rule against proselytizing, one that their chaplain should have known out. Let us not forget Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld prefacing his memos to President Bush with militaristic passages from the Bible.

At every turn the Bush administration pushed aside professional standards and expertise in all areas--law, foreign aid, climate science, and mental health--for ideological and religious reasons. Since the Vietnam War many veterans have not sought treatment for PTSD, primarily because of the perception that it was a sign of weakness, but now many are being denied treatment and encouraged to seek spiritual help instead. One exasperated clinician said that the Bush Veterans Administration's answer to mental health problems was contained in three words: "Jesus fixes everything."

Some conservatives have charged that the PTSD diagnosis was invented by anti-war activists and "leftist" psychiatrists such as Robert Jay

Lifton. The symptoms of PTSD cannot be explained away so easily. They have been described as consisting of "horrifying nightmares, hyper-vigilance, sleeplessness, and other potentially debilitating symptoms." Our veterans need a mental health system based on scientifically tested methods not on fanatical religion.

A 2008 study done by the highly respected RAND Corporation found that as many as 20 percent of Iraq and Afghan War veterans have "some form of mental illness, mostly PTSD and depression." Drug treatment must be combined with intensive counseling to bring these patients back to normal. Counseling with a military chaplain or private pastor is also encouraged, but not to the exclusion of secular treatment.

The preference for God over psychology has been confirmed by Tara McKelvey in an article in *The Boston Review*: "When a 2006 Government Accountability Office report raised questions about whether soldiers were getting the psychiatric help they needed, an assistant secretary of defense disputed the report's findings, pointing to the fact that soldiers were being referred to chaplains."

Counseling, both government and private, is very expensive and McKelvey states that "veterans' advocates say the pared-down treatment and the over-reliance on drugs is a result of government skepticism about PTSD, and the desire to cut costs." Because of budget cutbacks under the Bush presidency, veterans seeking PTSD treatment now have to wait up to five months for an appointment at VA clinics. As McKelvey states: "After years of neglect during the Bush administration, veterans now have nearly one million claims pending, a record high for the agency." The Obama administration is attempting to solve this problem and many others in the VA with the largest infusion of funds in 30 years. Critics say, however, that Obama is doing very little to counter conservative Christian influence in the military.

Many veterans self-medicate with alcohol and drugs off the street. They batter their spouses, take their own lives, and the lives of others. Nidal Hasan's rampage at Ft. Hood completely overshadowed the fact that a soldier murdered one of his compatriots there the day before. The rate at which soldiers killing themselves and others is rising at an alarming rate.

Roger Benimoff is an Iraq War veteran and a Baptist army chaplain. In his book *Faith Under Fire* he tells how he essentially broke down after many sessions of "Spiritually Uplifting" with his patients at Walter Reed Medical Center. He began to have questions about his faith when he admitted that if he were an omnipotent, benevolent father, as God is supposed to be, he would not let his children suffer like his patients, and a good deal of humanity, did.

Chaplain Benimoff eventually realized that he was also having serious psychological problems, and he was shocked to find that an army psychiatrist diagnosed him as having PTSD. He found that he was constantly provoking fights with his wife and that he was neglecting his two sons. He constantly thought of killing himself and others, because "all that was left was pure hatred toward all people."

Benimoff finally checked into Coatesville Medical Facility in Pennsylvania and found that his roommate was a Vietnam veteran who had suffered from PTSD for thirty years. As he went through the entry procedures, he was asked if he wanted to see a chaplain. His answer was "absolutely not."

I resent the fact that conservative Christians have permission to evangelize on our military bases, forcing many soldiers to decide between going to church services or face ostracism if they stay in their barracks. But most of all I feel sick at my stomach when I think of the 62,575 dead and 335,206 wounded in the wars in Vietnam and Iraq, wars that did not need to be fought. These families still mourn their loses, but my stomach really turns when I think of Benimoff's wife and two sons and thousands like them, who suffer from the burden of the walking wounded in our midst.

Nick Gier taught philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. He is heavily indebted to Tara McKelvey's article "God, the Army, and PTSD" in *The Boston Review* (November-December, 2009).