

In Theory: Does Jesus love nukes?

The U.S. Air Force has withdrawn a training course for nuclear missile officers after complaints that the training was heavily religious in nature.

“Nuclear Ethics and Nuclear Warfare,” which has been taught at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California for 20 years, was led by Air Force chaplains and investigated in July by the Military Religious Freedom Foundation after more than 30 officers — including Catholics and Protestants — complained about the religious content of the course. It had even been dubbed the “Jesus Loves Nukes” class by some attendants.

Among the protested content were references to St. Augustine's “Qualifications for Just War,” examples from the Old and New Testaments of biblical characters fighting “just” wars, and even a quote from Wernher von Braun, an SS officer who experimented on concentration camp inmates, who developed the V2 flying bomb and who, after World War II, became the father of the U.S. space program. A senior Air Force Space and Missile officer who reviewed the materials said the teachings are “an outrage of the highest order.”

Is there a place for religious teachings in military training courses?

Answer:

I am appalled that those in power in one of our U.S. military branches have commingled the field of ethics with Christian doctrine in a training course. And I am glad that the Military Religious Freedom Foundation has investigated the course taught at Vandenberg Air Force Base. However, one of my major concerns is that it took them 20 years to get the U.S. Air Force to withdraw a course that so blatantly used Christian doctrines to justify nuclear war. The fact that some of the attendees dubbed the course “Jesus Loves Nukes” is telling. Not every nuclear missile officer is Christian. What about the Muslims, the Hindus, the Buddhists and the nonbelievers?

But the training course is objectionable on yet another level. The field of ethics is not the same as the dogma of any religious tradition. Ethics is a discipline of philosophy that investigates the parameters of acting morally and is not limited to the field of religion of any stripe. A person can act ethically within a religious context, or with no religious beliefs. Religion is an individual choice, not something mandated by a government agency that should be governed by the doctrine of separation of church and state.

Finally, I am personally offended that religion has been used to justify war. As a person of faith, I find no justification whatever for supporting war with proof-texting from the Bible or any other religious source. There is no place for religious teachings in military training courses to motivate aggressive action. We would do well to encourage the study of “just peace,” rather than “just war.” That ethical investigation might help us create a more honorable country and a more just world.

Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford
Unitarian Universalist Church of the Verdugo Hills
La Crescenta

Yes and no. There is in virtually every religion the idea about getting along with one's neighbor, whether that neighbor is in your tribe or a different one. But there is also in virtually every religion the idea that sometimes deadly force might be necessary.

St. Augustine had a "just war" theory, and the great American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who died in 1971, made the point that somebody as evil as Adolf Hitler had to be dealt with forcefully, and Niebuhr meant military force.

But is every adversary of the United States as bad as Adolf Hitler? And is it a soldier's duty to kill someone his commanding officer tells him to kill?

The United States is a fairly religious country, meaning that many people who go into the military will have come from some kind of religious background. I can see why some military officers might search the Scriptures for instances where religious people did some killing, because they're trying to find justification for the troops they lead to do some killing also. Should those officers be allowed to point to those instances in Scripture where blood was shed? Probably not.

But how are you going to be sure that under the stress of combat, some rules don't get stressed or even outright broken? Perhaps the more important question to consider is: If a soldier decides that killing other human beings isn't for him/her, can he/she be allowed to file for Conscientious Objector status without harassment from commanding officers or his/her peers?

The Rev. Skip Lindeman
La Cañada Flintridge Congregational Church
La Cañada Flintridge

I believe there is a place — and even a necessity — for religious teachings in military training courses. However, there should be no space allowed for the kind of lessons that allegedly were provided to nuclear missile officers by the U.S. Air Force. The statements being attributed to the chaplains in this program are absolutely outrageous, and their cavalier attitude toward grave national and global security issues like nuclear warfare is downright scary. Frankly, I would expect more integrity and honor from our nation's finest.

I would suggest that the offending officers be sent to special sensitivity training, and that they have some face time with people who have survived the horrors of war — both soldiers and civilians. Hopefully these sobering discussions will help them better understand the nature of war and the gravity of the issues they are tasked with teaching.

I feel strongly that military training courses should include genuine religious and ethical principles regarding warfare. There are many biblical verses that exhort the virtues of peace and describe war only as a last resort. Religious teachings place the preservation of life (and even property) above all, and require these principles to be the guiding factors in any confrontation. These ideas, if properly presented during the training of our men and women in uniform, will hopefully lead to a more peaceful world, where people are able to respect each other and avoid conflict.

The prophet Isaiah states in the Bible that there will come a time when, "they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift the sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." Each one of us should do our part to help make this prophesy a reality.

Rabbi Simcha Backman
Chabad Jewish Center
Glendale

“Religious” is a rather broad term. It can refer to the teachings of different faiths that often contradict one another. But to narrow it down to the apparent sense in this case, let's assume we're referring to the teachings of the Bible. The answer is yes, there is a place for biblical teaching in military training courses, but only as long as men are willing to hear and accept the truth. It seems ludicrous to teach a course on ethics and yet keep God entirely out of it. The inescapable moral laws of the universe have been established by God himself and are irrevocably based on who he is. Those who divorce God from the topic of ethics must fall back on their own opinion and their limited understanding of life as they see it. Any truth they may discover by themselves is merely a stumbling over what God himself has set in place and already explained in the Bible.

There is such a thing as absolute truth. God has recorded it for us in the Bible that we might know it, and that it would set us free from error and hurt. Jesus Christ affirmed this when he prayed to the Father: “Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth” (John 17:17). Jesus even claimed to be the truth personified. Those who are wise build their lives upon obedience to God's word, and when trials come, they are the ones left standing. Those who despise God's word as “an outrage” will suffer the destructive consequences of having forsaken wisdom. Following God's ethical principles yields goodness for everyone who is willing to embrace them. God “stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk in integrity” (Proverbs 2:7). No such shield is promised even to defenders of nations who forsake his wisdom.

Pastor Jon Barta
Valley Baptist Church
Burbank

It seems, at first blush, like a good idea to have ethical training for those personnel involved in potential nuclear launches. We'd all like to think that the person with that key around his or her neck has already spent time weighing this action in his or her soul, holding it up to the light not only of military and historical wisdom, but also of the world's greatest religions and philosophies.

How nifty, if that were the training the military provides. But as near as I can tell, having looked through a copy of the slide presentation, the class falls far short of any such broad spectrum of ethical training. It's one-sided, citing only those biblical passages in which war is seen as good and just, and ignoring those passages which call for peace, forgiveness and love of our enemies (and ignoring non-biblical religions altogether).

An evenhanded presentation about biblical ethics for war would include, for instance, both of the following quotes:

“Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare war, stir up the warriors. Let all the soldiers draw near, let them come up. Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weakling say, ‘I am a warrior.’” (Joel 3:9-10)

“[The Lord] shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” (Isaiah 2:4)

A good ethics class would then engage students in a thoughtful conversation: How is it that the same Scriptures

can contain such diametrically opposed instruction on this point? Is there such a thing as deciding which passage is right? And can situational ethics have any place in military training, where at least half a person's usefulness lies in following orders without question?

I applaud the efforts of military leadership to provide this training. I hope that whatever course replaces this one will offer a deeper immersion in a broader spectrum of the ethical dimensions of nuclear might.

The Rev. Amy Pringle
St. George's Episcopal Church
La Cañada Flintridge

There is likely never a place for religious teaching in U.S. military training. Since the Constitution requires separation of church and state in America, other methods should be found to prepare military personnel.

We should ask what the ethical issue is around deploying nuclear weapons as part of our military arsenal. The issue is not the instructions of gods or religious leaders. The question is, can a military officer correctly judge when an order he or she is given is lawful, and when an order is unlawful and must be refused? In this case, the training that should be offered should aid the individual in determining when orders are lawful.

Problems with the presentation as it was used, before being suspended, include only mentioning people whose faiths are Christian, Jewish or Muslim. This excludes those soldiers who have no faith, or who follow alternative faiths. Also, the Christian Bible is used to argue for “just” war. But the Bible also contains examples of unjust war, and of pacifism. So the Bible is not suitable for the ethical problems that need to be addressed by the military and does not clearly support the intended ethical message.

Steven Gibson
South Pasadena Atheist Meetup
Altadena

I guess I should stop being surprised to find out that this sort of bizarre religious justification is part of military training. After all, leaders have been whitewashing the motives for war for centuries, ever since it became morally unacceptable to simply say to your tribe, “We need that water hole/hunting ground/seaport/gold mine/oilfield, so let's go get it!”

Once the strategizing for resources and power had to be cloaked in an end-times battle of good and evil to get the masses on board, the truth of the Gospel left the scene, to be forever replaced with the sort of warped theological reasoning we see in the Jesus Loves Nukes curriculum materials. Now every war can be a “just war” — rejoice!

I am encouraged to hear that at least 30 officers refused to be persuaded by these materials, either because the content does not line up with their beliefs, or because they insist on more rigorous, and less religious, ethical training. There definitely is a place for ethical training and personal religious counseling in the military, though deep encounters with our turn-the-other-cheek, love-your-enemies Jesus are bound to produce fewer officers ready to push that Big Red Button.

Here is what the international United Methodist Church says about war and nuclear weapons:

“We believe war is incompatible with the teaching and examples of Christ. We therefore reject war as an

instrument of national foreign policy, to be employed only as a last resort in the prevention of such evils as genocide, brutal suppression of human rights, and unprovoked international aggression, and insist that ... the production, possession, or use of nuclear weapons be condemned. Consequently, we endorse general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.” (Social Principles, paragraph 165C)

How about that? Still Christian, but a completely different interpretation of Scripture. Clearly the so-called Nuclear Ethics class has for 20 years intentionally skipped over a lot of valuable wisdom. We'll look forward to the new class. No — we'll look forward to the day when nuclear disarmament leads to a big fat open time slot in the Air Force training schedule.

The Rev. Paige Eaves
Crescenta Valley United Methodist Church
Montrose

Why would you not use quotes from the primary philosophical text of Western civilization, especially those dealing with military ethics? There is a reason that there are exponentially more Christian Crosses and Stars of David on military graves than any other. The vast majority of American soldiers have a biblical background, whether personally trained up in the Judeo-Christian traditions or as citizen recipients of the vast majority that were. And just because some of the greatest minds of history are classified as Christian saints should not exclude them from weighing in ethically. Every Christian on the planet is, Scripturally speaking, a saint, not just those that get an official thumbs up by the Roman Catholic Church. So if Saint Augustine speaks with profound insight regarding the ethics of war, soldiers would be enriched by hearing him. They may also benefit from hearing other experienced practitioners of martial arts and military ethics, which is the case in the military presentation that references George Washington as well as Wernher Von Braun.

Also, if we aren't having our nation's ethical specialists teach the classes on military ethics, who will do it? Or are we saying there are no ethics regarding the wholesale annihilation of civilian populations with nuclear cremation? If there are no ethics, then sure, forget giving soldiers food for thought and let them just kill without it. Or might they, when suddenly struck by the grave nature of their immediate task, refuse to carry out their orders as morality (ethics) raises urgent unanswered questions for them?

Teaching young service people about ethical war gets them ready for the day they are called upon to engage. It's just like teaching teenagers the ethics of dating. You don't gamble on them creating a viable ethic on the spur of the moment in the back seat of a car. You instruct beforehand, you give them something ethical and practical to think about, and you hope for a good application of that training, should it become necessary.

I say, keep educating nuclear button-pushers with all sage instruction — biblical and otherwise.

Rev. Bryan Griem
Montrose Community Church

Is there a place for religious teachings in military training courses?

By all means, let the curricula in military training include the teachings of all religions on violence and war, paying particular attention to non-Western religions with which U.S. students are less likely to be familiar. The ethical and moral thinking of secular philosophers on the matter would be worthwhile as well.

In my opinion, limiting such content to a Christian perspective constitutes official establishment of a particular

religion and is a constitutional violation.

I would be shocked and dismayed by this latest revelation of apparent violations of church/separation within the Air Force, were not such outrages so common for so long.

The founder of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, Mikey Weinstein, encountered religious intolerance in 1973 during his first year at the Air Force Academy. He was assaulted by fellow students for attempting to have withheld from his paycheck a donation to the United Way, knowing that the United Jewish Appeal would be one beneficiary.

This registered Republican, and son and father of service academy graduates, continues to be a leading figure in the fight against these abuses.

The atheist community and other Bill of Rights news hounds tend to know the deplorable history of the Air Force's constitutional violations. Good for In Theory for raising this issue before an audience who might not otherwise have encountered this story.

Roberta Medford
Atheist
Montrose

The lesser issue in this week's question is the preservation of American religious pluralism in the context of military training for "Nuclear Ethics and Nuclear Warfare." Yes, there may be a place for religious teachings in military training courses, if the content represents our common secular and interfaith religious values. Carefully crafted words are needed to strike the proper balance of concerns to account for our diverse religious affiliations, particularly in light of the gravity of nuclear warfare. In general, specific religious quotations should be avoided, as they run counter to the constitutional mandate that no state religion shall be established.

The more significant issue brought up by this topic, however, is the morality of actual nuclear warfare. Large-scale nuclear weapons have no means of discriminating between military combatants and non-combatant civilians. Here, Islam has a definitive position. There is absolutely no justification for intentionally killing non-combatants in any armed struggle, according to the teachings of Islam, not to mention the widespread destruction of the environment and animal life on a long-term basis. This simply cannot be avoided if a nuclear weapon is deployed.

The use of biblical quotations is troublesome in the context of convincing an individual to deploy nuclear weapons. Here, Christian teachings were used to convince young minds to suppress their rational logic and human sentiment to kill innocent civilians on a massive scale. This kind of exploitation of religious teachings can be dangerous. An analogy can be made to the way Islamic extremists distort Islam to justify acts of terrorism.

The Air Force revision of the nuclear training material is a positive step that supports Islamic values of religious pluralism, the use of rational thought and our common shared values. The grand debate of nuclear weaponry still remains an open moral issue for the preservation of innocent life.

Levent Akbarut
Islamic Congregation of La Cañada Flintridge

Copyright © 2011, Pasadena Sun