

Cognitive Dissonance and Religion in Military Stability Operations

by William B. Scott

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God...I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature would "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between Church and State.

—Thomas Jefferson¹

The United States of America is a Christian nation...The less we emphasize the Christian religion, the further we fall into the abyss of poor character and chaos in the United States of America.

—Mississippi Governor Kirk Fordice²

Introduction

Cognitive dissonance is a psychological theory about how the mind resolves conflicting beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors held simultaneously. For many Americans, it is important to “emphasize the Christian religion,” while maintaining a “separation between Church and State.” Although the two statements above would seem to conflict, many Americans preserve these understandings of the nation by rejecting the inconsistency and convincing themselves that no conflict really exists. In military stability operations, cognitive dissonance toward religion can skew policymakers’ perceptions, when they need to remain objectively neutral.

The First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States decrees: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”³

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The Establishment Clause refers to the phrase “no laws respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” of this amendment. This clause means that Congress or any government body, such as the military, cannot institute a national religion or prefer one religion over another. The intent of this article is to highlight the importance of acknowledging widespread Christianity in all aspects of life due to its effects on military stability operations. The time-honored wisdom from Sun-Tzu is still valid in the modern world:

If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.⁴

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If applied to military stability operations, one could surmise that ignoring the driving religious factors in the U.S. military ensures failure in stability operations in other regions with strong religious cultures.

A stability operation in a foreign land is often a delicate art. Religion is an important cultural factor during stability operations on both sides, as the outside world may perceive the U.S. to have religious motivations, and ignorance of the religious motivators involved will often result in defeat.

Cognitive Dissonance

In 1957, Leon Festinger developed the Cognitive Dissonance Theory. He proposed that people seek to maintain a cognitive consistency

in any situation, including situations with conflicting beliefs and attitudes. When two or more of such beliefs and attitudes clash, it creates a state of tension and can cause irrational and sometimes maladaptive behavior.⁵

The knowledge that religion plays a key role in stability operations existed in the Chaplain Corps for years. In 1998, Chaplain Timothy Demy wrote a thesis, “The Impact of Religious Belief in Military Operations Other Than War,” in which he states that “neglect, dismissal, or confusion about religion can be extremely detrimental to the legitimacy of the operation.”⁶ While this knowledge has been around for some time, most Americans, tend to deal with the issues connected to religious diversity by simply not acknowledging the problem.⁷ Although U.S. military doctrine acknowledges religion as a factor to consider, its importance is highly underemphasized. Although it has been argued that religion affects political, military, economic, and social issues,⁸ religion is not discussed well in Army doctrine. Current Army doctrine reference publications state that “religion is often a central defining characteristic in some forms of government and cannot be discounted by external actors,”⁹ but it does not provide further guidance on religion.

For the U.S. to be the beacon of religious freedom, it needs a consistent policy as viewed by the world in general toward religion. Cognitive dissonance is also a force to change and grow when the roots of the inconsistencies are acknowledged and a conscientious decision is made to change personal beliefs and attitudes, but only after the discrepancy in attitude and behavior is confronted.¹⁰ In stability operations, religion should be one of the first considerations to define the operational environment of the host nation. Other considerations should include the attitude of the U.S. in general, as well as the personal religious beliefs of the policymakers. Once officials confront the religious actors, they will better apply cultural awareness of religious

minorities throughout the world to include inside the U.S.

Veneer of the “Sacred Canopy”

A “sacred canopy” is a term coined by sociologist Peter Berger. A “sacred canopy” exists when the myths, traditions, and convictions of a religion envelop a society and form a pluralistic environment in which the constructed nature is tacit and concealed.¹¹ Approximately three-quarters of Americans are Christians.¹² Some Americans would point to this fact as evidence of the nation’s strength of moral leadership and righteous actions, while others would deny the influence that Christianity holds over the government. But when a nation ratifies laws and regulations with bases that are solely the myths, traditions, and convictions of a religion, they fortify the sacred canopy.

Blue laws, which restrict public behavior and commercial sales on Sunday, originated as religious measures to encourage church attendance. Despite the religious origins and intent of these laws, many states continue to enact and enforce them,¹³ while the courts provide secular justification rather than declaring them unconstitutional under the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.¹⁴

The military relationship to Christianity is no different. As noted by the Officers’ Christian Fellowship: “Christian officers actually have an advantage in achieving the best results” because basic concepts of leadership align with the Christian faith.¹⁵ Additionally, during combat deployments and initial entry training, alcoholic beverages are contraband items and consumption is against General Orders; a common exception, however, is a small draught of red wine that service members may take during communion worship services. The Christian religion continues to dominate the social and moral fiber of the U.S. to include the military.

The sacred canopy of the Christian religion envelops many social fibers of America and

the military, and it is sometimes difficult to differentiate the religious-based customs in a foreign culture. In order to properly navigate social issues, policymakers, therefore, need to reflect on their own culture and religion when constructing strategies to be implemented in an idiosyncratic foreign environment.

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Religious Ethics in Stability Operations

Most international issues concerning religion focus on terrorist acts and the resulting military responses, with little focus on diplomacy influenced by religious convictions protected by the sacred canopy in regards to stability operations. Many military commanders, however, will find themselves in the midst of various religious challenges while conducting stability operations. Commanders must ensure they do not create an appearance of favoring a particular religion while engaging the local nation’s senior military leadership, government officials, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and intergovernmental organization officials, and national religious officials.¹⁶ This is especially the case where many NGOs and local host nations put a religious spin on every aspect of life.

Religious fundamentalism is characterized by the certainty that one has access to the absolute truth. This belief leads to prejudice against other religions and members of any other religion, and while there is much research between the internal relationships of religion and domestic social issues, there is relatively little analyses devoted to comparable international issues.¹⁷ Often stability operations are rooted in faith-

based advocacy networks pushing Congress for human rights initiatives, especially in locations that oppress Judeo-Christian beliefs. Since “morality” usually emerges as the justification for advocating such policies, many advocates believe in a “higher calling” and resist leadership that deviates from the religious standards.¹⁸ An unfortunate side effect is the significant social impact that zealous believers and advocates have because of their need to purge sin from their lives and the world in general, heedless of the fact that those actions may restrict the civil liberties of minority groups.¹⁹

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Religiously righteous sentiments do not exist solely at the policymaking levels of government, they exist at the tactical levels of the military as well. Some service members have been told by chaplains and the chain of command that their fight is “a religious one against the Muslims and their false, evil, and violent religion.”²⁰ Although officially unsupported, this behavior continues to thrive because the American ideologies of business leadership and military command are founded in a Christian value structure, including but not limited to the Ten Commandments.²¹ For many Americans, the personal interpretation of the “will of God” is powerful in influencing views of moral and social issues, which is stronger than General Orders and an open, interfaith policy to all religions that is enforced with mediocrity.²²

Unfortunately, the social significance of American’s beliefs and attitudes toward Christianity’s relationship to other religions

is often overlooked.²³ Just as a sacred canopy of Christianity exists in America and the U.S. military, a sacred canopy of Islam exists in Muslim nations. While in the U.S. there is a concept of the separation of Church and State, Islamic nations practice Sharia law, where religion is integrated and embedded in politics and other parts of society and culture. Thus, officials and citizens of Islamic nations view many aspects of political activity through a religious lens.

Often missing from considerations during stability operations is the impact religious humanitarian organizations have when engaging marginalized demographics. These organizations do not operate with religiously sterile attitudes. They are populated with donors and individuals who initiate programs, host discussions, sponsor classes, support missionaries, teach people to sing, promote volunteering, and many other things. Many represent religious priorities that vary among congregations, often overlooked by military and national policymakers. Any military operation in support of a movement supported by such religious organizations shows support of the religion and by extension can easily be perceived as supported by America as a whole.

Military commanders can find themselves in a tug-o-war regarding religious politics. Due to the integrated nature of Sharia law in Islamic cultures, a coalition task force in Afghanistan found that the “Muslim Chaplain was particularly helpful in connecting with the Muslim community both among contractors of Muslim countries and Local Nationals.”²⁴ A chaplain’s understanding of the two nations’ sacred canopies allowed him to bridge operations in more ways than expected. Influence from politicians with religious-centric agendas and the personal beliefs of many commanders make it difficult to examine religion objectively with professional detachment, but understanding how the host nation’s sacred canopy interacts with the American sacred canopy is critically important

in stability operations.

Integrating Other Religions

Commanders and policymakers with an unwitting conviction to a sacred canopy fail to address religion's possible negative influence on military stability operations in operational environments saturated with a different and separate religious sacred canopy. During Operation Iraqi Freedom, some mosques were designated military areas; these religious structures were cordoned off by concertina wire with signs stating: "On order of the MNC-I commander, this location is off-limits to U.S. personnel."²⁵ Ironically, strategic policymakers consider this as being culturally sensitive to the host nation, but what message does a cordon with sharp wire, as if in disdain, send? Although allowing *kafir*, non-believers, to defile it may have outraged fundamentalists, a stronger image would be to allow Islamic service members to care for the mosques, use them in reverence, and respect them the way the host nation intended. If an Iraqi partner expressed the idea that Americans should not enter the mosque, perhaps the official was under the impression that the U. S. is, in fact, a Christian nation, and there was no evidence to change that interpretation. A similar recommendation was raised by the Unit Ministry Team for Combined/Joint Task Force 101 in Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom IX. Team members believed that "chaplains should assess the condition of mosques on their Forward Operating Bases and coordinate with Muslim Lay Leaders to keep them maintained and resourced."²⁶ After operating in a Muslim country for eight years, service members of the Muslim faith received a recommendation from a religious support leader to maintain the mosques inside the camps.

The representation of different religions in the Chaplain Corps, however, is unmistakably skewed. As of 2013, most of the approximately 2,900 chaplains throughout all the services

were Christian, with a few representing the Jewish religion. There were only five Islamic, one Buddhist, and one Hindu chaplain to represent all other faiths.²⁷ This fact is often overlooked because a chaplain is supposed to provide spiritual and moral support to the troops regardless of religious affiliation and without proselytization, to protect the religious practice of the soldiers without inviting legal challenges under the Establishment Clause. The irony is that not all religions are represented within the Chaplain Corps. In an address regarding interfaith practice, President Barack Obama said:

...as we go forward, it's going to take all of us, Christian and Jews, Hindu and Muslims, believer and non-believers to meet the challenges of the 21st century...while we might not all believe the same things, and we don't have to, we can certainly agree that together we can make a difference... that the values that unite us as Americans are far more powerful than those that divide us.²⁸

This spirit is growing in the military as well. Since 2010, the military has become more religiously diverse, to include admitting bearded Sikhs in the Army through special waivers and

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recognizing Wiccans. There is great power in the diversity of the U.S., and all religions should be equally recognized in the nation's fighting forces to leverage the full American might.

Conclusion

United States policymakers have slowly but surely actively progressed forward in creating an open, interfaith environment for U.S. service members, but this does not change the fact that many perceptions continue to be skewed by the sacred canopy of Christianity that is commonplace in America. Although the government, including the military, would contend that an interfaith community is the correct course of action, the fault lies in how much of Christianity is taken for granted, and what is the perception of non-Christians observing the actions of the U.S. government.

The military can implement changes in doctrine to facilitate future success in operations. The Chaplain Corps can reflect the demographics of religious belief within the services as well as the predominate religion within the locations of important stability operations. Ethics training for all services members should include the knowledge of religious myths, traditions, and convictions taken for granted under the sacred canopy in the U.S., to include concepts of marriage, sin, and death. To ensure that an interfaith community exists in the military, all major installations should have Jewish synagogues, Muslim mosques, and, when possible, even Pagan groves and temples to other faiths such as Buddhism, Hindu, Sikh, etc. These changes would ensure a military dedicated to the understanding of all religions beyond a tacit acceptance of other religions.

Only by seriously considering the impact of the religious beliefs of both the enemy and friendly forces can commanders truly gain a full understanding of the operational environment needed to achieve success in stability operations. To accomplish this task, a deep understanding of the religious beliefs is mandatory along with an honest assessment of what impact religious beliefs have in American culture. This understanding will facilitate an open, interfaith community, but more importantly, it will assist the military in stability operations at locations that have historically been religiously tenuous. **IAJ**

NOTES

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- 2 Kirk Fordice, Republican Governors Association, November 18, 1992.
- 3 "Constitution of the United States," Amendment 1.
- 4 Sun Tzu, "Art of War," <<http://suntzusaid.com/book/3/18>>, accessed on November 13, 2014.
- 5 Leon Feringer, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1957.
- 6 Timothy J. Demy, "The Impact of Religious Belief in Military Operations other than War," thesis, Naval War College, Newport, RI, 1998.
- 7 Stephen M. Merino, "Religious Diversity in a 'Christian Nation': The Effects of Theological Exclusivity and Interreligious Contact on the Acceptance of Religious Diversity," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, June 2010, pp. 231–246.
- 8 *Leader's Guide: Chaplains in Current Operations. Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures Handbook*, Center of Army Lessons Learned, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2008.
- 9 Army Doctrine Reference Publication 3-07, *Stability Operations*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, 2013.

- 10 Festinger.
- 11 Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, Open Road Media, New York, 1967.
- 12 Multiple sources vary. The percentage of Christians in the U.S. range from as low as 70 percent to as high as 82 percent depending on the source.
- 13 As of December 2014, 12 states forbid the sale of alcohol on Sunday, while another 19 states permit county and/or local legislation to restrict the sale on Sunday.
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- 20 Chris Rodda, "Soldiers Forced to See Chaplain after Failing Spiritual Fitness Test," December 20, 2010, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/chris-rodde/soldiers-forced-to-see-ch_b_810558.html>, accessed on October 17, 2014.
- 21 Brint and Abrutyn, pp. 328–350.
- 22 Merino.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Gary Hensley, "OEF IX Religious Support AAR, (April 08–April 09)," memorandum for Combined Joint Task Force 101 Commander, Bagram Airfield, APO AE 09354. Bagram Airfield: U.S. Government, March 15, 2009.
- 25 Personal witness during a rotation in support to OIF.
- 26 Hensley. FOB is short for Forward Operating Base. They are temporary military encampments in forward deployed locations.
- 27 Carol Kirk, "Wild Garden: Pagans in the Growing Interfaith Landscape," September 20, 2013, <<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/wildgarden/2013/09/military-chaplaincy-interfaith-at-risk/>>, accessed on October 17, 2014.
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