

REFLECTIONS

A Third Way for the Chaplain Corps: Resisting Secular Spirituality and Religious Nationalism

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"We are going to make the Chaplain Corps great again."¹ I suspect all religious affairs personnel in the armed forces experienced an emotional response to this announcement. Many of us became excited about the prospect of a new era for the Chaplain Corps, as we believe religious liberty in the armed forces to be threatened and feel limited in our ability to minister. Others of us fear that decades of advocating for justice will be tossed aside, and we feel compelled to stand up for those who identify with less prevalent religious traditions or no tradition at all. Both reactions are valid and their seeming opposition might obscure how they each reveal deep uncertainty about what it means to be a military chaplain today. Secularity presents unique challenges to religion and spirituality associated with military ministry.² Now is the time to reevaluate our sense of identity and purpose as a Corps. The Chaplain Corps and numerous chaplains—perhaps inadvertently through the acceptance of holistic health frameworks or in pursuit of institutional relevance—have gradually embraced secular spirituality rather than accepting the challenges of secularity. This move puts at risk the foundation of religious affairs, which is to "enable and support free expression of religion" and "guard against religious discrimination of any kind."³ The Chaplain Corps also faces an emerging phenomenon in response to secularity in the form of religious nationalism. This is not unique to religion in the United States but rather is an emerging global trend with which we must contend. Military chaplains desperately need clarity regarding the challenges associated with secularity as we seek to faithfully provide for the free exercise of religion. In the face of secularity, the Chaplain Corps faces two challenges: it must resist reducing religious traditions to a category of holistic health and resist the fusion of religion and nationalism.

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1 Secretary of War Pete Hegseth (@SecWar), "We are going to make the Chaplain Corps great again," Video, December 16, 2025, <https://x.com/SecWar/status/2001113071108882526>.

2 See Luke Heibel, "Cultivating Spiritual Readiness in a Secular Age: Embracing the Challenge and Opportunities of Ministry in the Contested Spiritual Domain," *The U.S. Army Chaplain Corps Journal* (2021): 30-38.

3 Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Religious Affairs in Joint Operations* (JP 3-83) (Washington, DC: Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2022), II-2.

The Challenge of Secularity

Our contemporary religious context is summed up in the reality that we live in a secular age.⁴ The late philosopher Charles Taylor described one of the distinctive characteristics of modernity as secularity, the option to believe or not believe.⁵ Secularity is not in and of itself bad. In everyday usage, “secular” is a word that represents nonreligious ideas, activities, or artifacts, and it conveys immanence in contrast to transcendence. Secularity is the “context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search takes place.”⁶ Thus, secularity “enables the formation and preservation of a common life among members of multiple traditions—both religious and nonreligious.”⁷ It is the conditions of secularity that afford us the constitutional structure recognized as “a wall of separation between church and state.”⁸ In a pre-modern era, with few exceptions, individuals kept the traditions of their parents. However, the liberalism characteristic of modernity, with its emphasis on individual rights and freedom of conscience, set the conditions for secularity. The mantra “separation of church and state” concisely articulates the American model of secularity, which captures an institutional commitment to maintain neutrality that enables the free exercise of religion in a pluralistic society.

In the context of modern secularity, a new religious worldview emerges—nonreligious. The category of nonreligious embodies the option to identify meaning and purpose without reference to God or any transcendent reality.⁹ Many today think that nonreligious ideas are objective, but the underlying teleology and axiology of nonreligious worldviews are not value neutral. To assert that nonreligious perspectives are uniquely objective reflects a tendency toward reducing moral and religious disagreement to mere expressions of preference.¹⁰ Every religious tradition or worldview identifies both a principal problem facing humanity and a solution.¹¹ In this framework, nonreligious worldviews accept “no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing.”¹² For the nonreligious person, the search for meaning and purpose is the means to the end state of human flourishing.

⁴ See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007).

⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 19.

⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

⁷ Luke Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), 229.

⁸ Thomas Jefferson, “Letter to the Danbury Baptist Association” (1802), Bill of Rights Institute, accessed January 8, 2026, <https://bri-wp-images.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/Letters-between-Thomas-Jefferson-and-the-Danbury-Baptists.pdf>.

⁹ Nonreligious worldviews include atheism, secular humanism, and spiritual but not religious. See The Pluralism Project, “The Spiritual but not Religious,” *Today’s Challenges*, Harvard University (2021), <https://pluralism.org/spiritual-but-not-religious>.

¹⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 23.

¹¹ Stephen Prothero, *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 14.

¹² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 18.

Meaning and purpose are universally important. Most religious people do not see the search for meaning and purpose as an existential problem, largely, because religious traditions articulate different accounts of the existential problems facing humanity. Religious traditions also have robust narratives and teachings within which adherents discern meaning and purpose. While the concept of meaning and purpose are universally relatable, the idea that finding this meaning is an individual's primary existential task is not. That orientation describes exclusive humanism which Taylor describes as "a 'self-sufficing' worldview that operates entirely within an immanent frame, standing as the primary contrast to religious belief in our secular age."¹³ Religious traditions typically provide a foundational framework captured in worldviews and ways of life within which that search takes place.

The word "spiritual" means many things today. It is a word with ancient roots, but the effects of modernity have made it contested. Religious affairs professionals must be clear about terms associated with spirituality. Nonreligious ideas about spirituality are a form of secular spirituality derived from exclusive humanism. Spirituality as a component of health captured in biopsychosocial-spiritual frameworks of holistic wellness exemplify this type of secular spirituality.¹⁴ Positive psychology uses the term "spiritual" to convey a universal idea of "an ultimate, transcendent, sacred, and divine force."¹⁵ This understanding of spirituality reflects an emerging and influential cultural shift. Lisa Miller has further substantiated the "science of spirituality" through her research.¹⁶ These ideas about spirituality and holistic health were institutionalized across the military, evidenced by the Army's spiritual readiness initiative, Army holistic health doctrine related to spiritual readiness, and the recently rescinded spiritual fitness guide. While ideas about spirituality related to health have value, they address a human need different from that of religion. Religious communities engage in spiritual practices for reasons that transcend (and at times, challenge) military readiness and lethality. Spirituality is not solely a tool to enhance lethality.

Spirituality, religious or nonreligious, must be understood contextually. Ideas about spirituality depend on one's tradition and worldview. The Constitution protects religious freedom and any provision of support or protection for the exercise of spirituality needs to be understood within that context. To support the free exercise of religion and guard against religious discrimination, we must regard atheism and humanism as seriously as other religious traditions rather than reducing both to a generic spirituality. By

¹³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 19.

¹⁴ See Daniel P. Sulmasy, "A biopsychosocial-spiritual model for the care of patients at the end of life," *The Gerontologist*, vol. 42, Spec No 3 (2002): 24-33. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/42.suppl_3.24.

¹⁵ Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman, *Character strengths and virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 601.

¹⁶ Lisa Miller, *The Awakened Brain: The New Science of Spirituality and Our Quest for an Inspired Life* (New York: Random House, 2021), 8.

embracing a vision of secular spirituality, the Chaplain Corps risks both undermining its own free exercise mission and compromising the religious support it provides. The primary purpose of chaplains is not to serve as spiritual guides, helping people find their sense of meaning and purpose outside of religious traditions and within the context holistic health. We must avoid reducing religious belief and practice to a category of holistic health in favor of promoting religious faith as the cornerstone of a person.

The Challenge of Nationalism

Religious nationalism is an equally concerning response to secularity. Through religious nationalism, people seek to impose a single religious identity on society. Religious nationalism is a unique form of religious anti-liberalism, which philosopher Kevin Vallier describes as a doctrine that claims “society should recognize a single religion as correct and... reject liberal order with intensity—and total conviction.”¹⁷ Social science scholar Liah Greenfeld identifies national identity and national consciousness as the components of nationalism.¹⁸ Nationalism is not deviant, but rather an emergent phenomenon characteristic of the modern era. Nationalism is unavoidable in modern society. The statement, “I am an American Soldier” that opens the Soldier’s Creed is, in fact, a proclamation of national identity.¹⁹ However, given the implied membership status associated with both nation and religion, it should not be surprising that individuals wrestle with each cultural force in competition for their true allegiance and sense of identity. A persistent tension exists in today’s world of nations. Greenfeld writes, “Today’s confrontations are not confrontations *between* nationalism and democracy; they are confrontations *within* nationalism and democracy.”²⁰ The free exercise of religion is antithetical to religious anti-liberalism, and yet religious anti-liberalism only emerges within the context of liberal democracy. Given this tension existing between religion and nation within liberal democracy, it makes sense that people seek to reduce this tension, even if they are not always aware of doing so. The integration of religion and governance structures—religious nationalism—is attractive to many. Religious nationalism is a response to this tension. It occurs when national identity is defined in religious terms such that national membership requires religious adherence. Understanding nationalism as essential to modernity makes it clearer that religious nationalism is a response to liberalism, i.e., secularity. Comprehending the role of religion in contemporary American society depends on seeing this dynamic clearly

¹⁷ Kevin Vallier, *All the Kingdoms of the World: On Radical Religious Alternatives to Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 1.

¹⁸ Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: A Short History* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2019), 18.

¹⁹ Department of the Army, *The Army: A Primer to Our Profession of Arms* (FM 1) (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2025), 83.

²⁰ Greenfeld, *Nationalism*, 18.

Religious nationalism is a response to tension between nation and religion associated with modernity. And it is fraught. Religious nationalism unequivocally threatens the principle of nonestablishment. The sectarian nature of religious nationalism challenges the status quo of liberal democracy. However, these claims alone are not sufficient to establish an argument against religious nationalism. After all, the status of the United States as a secular nation-state is unique in the world. Political science scholar Ahmet Kuru suggests only the United States and France meet essential criteria of a secular state, which include an institutional separation of state and religion, a secularist state ideology, no privileged religion, and no state management of religion.²¹ The United States could join the ranks of all the other nation-states that privilege a religion, manage religion, or cooperate with religion and tear down the wall of separation. Religious nationalists want to end secularism in the United States in favor of a religious anti-liberalism. As Vallier and others articulate, the cost associated with this move is not only political, it also threatens religious freedom. Giving up secularism and a pluralistic American society in favor of religious anti-liberalism or religious nationalism requires that we also forfeit religious freedom altogether. Throughout American history, religious freedom has been a beacon marking the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And I would contend that religious liberty is the foundational principle of freedom itself.

There are good reasons—religious and political—to choose the secularity associated with liberalism over religious nationalism. Religious nationalism is attractive because it promises to resolve the tension between nation and religion by collapsing them into one identity. While religious conviction can and should guide how we exercise political rights, to impose one's will on the state is misguided if we are to preserve the free exercise of religion. Theological Ethicist Luke Bretherton writes, "The 'faithful secularity' that certain kinds of democratic politics generates allows for the public recognition and interplay of the myriad obligations and commitments that citizens keep faith with (whether 'transcendent' or 'immanent') and which must be coordinated and negotiated in order to generate a common life."²² This wisdom is especially critical for chaplains, who must themselves resist the modern tendency to compartmentalize their faith.²³ Personal commitments to religious nationalism are protected by the free exercise of religion, as they should be, but religious nationalism in practice challenges democracy and is incompatible with the War Department's instruction on the appointment

²¹ See Ahmet T. Kuru, *Secularism and State Policies toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

²² Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 8.

²³ Luke Heibel, "Chaplain Pursuit of 'Buffered Selves': Shepherding the Tough in Spirit" *Military Chaplaincy Review* 6, no. 1 (2024): 24-28. <https://doi.org/10.65589/001c.156285>.

and service of chaplains.²⁴ Chaplains are citizens who can vote to impose their religious convictions on the state, but they must not leverage their position as religious leaders in the military to coerce others.

The government should not restrict chaplains about what they say in the confines of religious services. The standards of human dignity and respect alone, in addition to ecclesiastical endorser requirements and expectations, should guide the chaplain's work of sacred communication with one important caveat. While what a military chaplain proclaims in a religious worship service should be regarded as sacred speech and governed only by ecclesiastical endorsement, chaplains have an ethical duty to "bear true faith and allegiance" to the Constitution of the United States at all times.²⁵ As chaplains, we have taken an oath to uphold the Establishment Clause and Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment, and this means remaining committed to liberal democracy, eschewing any temptations to promote an agenda of religious nationalism. Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, "American priests have seen this truth before anyone else, and they model their conduct on it. They have seen that religious influence had to be renounced, if they wanted to acquire a political power, and they preferred to lose the support of power than to share its vicissitudes."²⁶ In keeping with this ideal, chaplains should not fuse religion and nationalism but exercise commitment to performing religious services and coordinating religious support as required by law.

A Third Way

Secularity creates a unique challenge for religious leaders. Media in many forms aggrandizes a false dichotomy between the secular and religious. In a recent CNN interview with correspondent Pamela Brown, an interviewee plainly stated, "There is no neutral position. You're either headed in this direction of secularism or you're going towards the cross."²⁷ This statement perfectly captures ideas espoused by someone enamored by religious nationalism and opposed to secularism. However, this challenge is not binary. A third way has characterized American democratic ideals for 250 years. This third way does not seek to eliminate the tension between secular and religious but maintains it. Theologian Michael Bird writes, "My contention is that as religion and politics get increasingly volatile, people of faith in many Western jurisdictions need to be willing to lose their cultural privileges and

²⁴ Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, *Appointment and Service of Military Chaplains* (DoDI 1304.28) (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2024).

²⁵ Army, *The Army*, 81.

²⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, edited by Eduardo Nolla, translated by James T. Schleifer, English edition (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Inc., 2012), EBSCOhost, 485.

²⁷ Andrew McIlwain, interview by Pamela Brown, "The Rise of Christian Nationalism," *The Whole Story with Anderson Cooper*, CNN, March 22, 2026.

resist potential state coercion in order to maintain their religious liberties.”²⁸ Bird articulates in his book that this tension actually presents a unique opportunity for robust religious faith and practice. When coercion is limited, one is afforded the freedom to choose their religious faith, and this is what makes many proud to be American.

In contemporary culture, we must resist reducing religious traditions to a category of holistic health and resist the fusion of religion and nationalism. This is not a problem limited to military chaplaincy. A research initiative led by scholars from Brigham Young University and Harvard explores religion as resource for education, and they introduce the idea of a nonsectarian “third way” that is “meant to be a middle ground between the secularists and growing sectarianism.”²⁹ A third way is a cultural recommitment to the separation of church and state not just for political reasons, but for religious ones. For religious people in a liberal democracy to remain steadfast in their convictions today, a robust commitment to a third way is required. Our democratic republic demands it, and our military service members depend on it from their religious affairs professionals.

Practically speaking, a third way means chaplains (and all service members) remain nonpartisan. In the Army, “[b]eing nonpartisan means not favoring any specific political party or group” and “assures the public that our Army will always serve the Constitution and our people loyally and responsively.”³⁰ Overt and explicit religious nationalism fail to uphold this standard. As Vallier writes, “illiberalism fuels political polarization.”³¹

A third way encompasses a commitment to religious affairs, including religious support and advisement.³² Central to a military chaplain’s purpose is the ability for chaplains to offer religious services for service members who cannot be reached by civilian ministers. Chaplaincy today happens in many contexts—from hospitals to corporations—but military chaplaincy is unique in the premium it places on leading religious services. While military chaplains can and should offer an array of support for service members and their families (e.g., pastoral care and counseling), we must appreciate that religious services are nonnegotiable and central to ministry in the armed forces. Religious services are unavailable in forward deployed environments unless a religious leader accompanies the service members; chaplains and

28 Michael F. Bird, *Religious Freedom in a Secular Age: A Christian Case for Liberty, Equality, and Secular Government* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2022), xxi.

29 Bryant Jensen and Irvin L. Scott, “Faith in Educational Renewal: Religion as a Resource to Transform Learning Opportunities,” Wheatley Institute, 10, <https://wheatley.byu.edu/0000019c-fd37-d3b9-a1dc-ffff6470000/faitn-in-educational-renewal-religion-as-a-resource-to-transform-learning-opportunities>.

30 Army, *The Army*, 12.

31 Vallier, *Alternatives to Liberalism*, 87.

32 Department of the Army, *Religious Affairs* (FM 3-83) (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2025), 1.

lay ministers in uniform are those religious leaders. Thus, religious worship services represent the main effort of religious support and ministry. Service members require opportunities to practice their religious traditions in the form of embodied religious experiences—prayer, fasting, baptism, confession, communion, etc. When religious affairs efforts are distracted from this main effort, they risk letting down the service members who count on us as religious affairs professionals. As chaplains, we are expected to lean on our seminary or divinity school preparations, glean from our clergy experiences, and remain accountable to our ecclesiastical endorers.

Much of what chaplains currently do and are expected to do does not require an experienced clergyperson. A capable military social worker would be sufficient in most cases. Proponents of an expanded role for chaplains see the opportunity to care for others holistically as sufficient justification for this shift. Whether because of a desire to remain relevant and universally helpful or the internalization of a gradual shift toward secular spirituality or both, many chaplains have gone so far above and beyond our core function that the scope of ministry now varies greatly from one chaplain to another. Units and chapels hold their breath when a new chaplain arrives to assess what type of chaplain they are receiving. While leader personalities vary, our leaders, service members, and families should have greater consistency regarding chaplain capabilities. The Chaplain Corps requires assistance from ecclesiastical endorers to determine what is essential or ministry to service members.

Conclusion

Chaplains must recommit their efforts to guiding service members toward the wisdom of their sacred texts and traditions rather than serving as secular spiritual guides or proponents of religious nationalism. The conditions of secularity create a contested moral landscape that offers both a challenge and an opportunity. In addition to resisting the reduction of religious traditions to a category of holistic health and resisting the fusion of religion and nationalism, chaplains and religious affairs professionals must promote practices of religious faith. While such practices may sustain warfighters, that is not their ultimate purpose. Religious practices also shape the moral framework and spiritual resolve that allows a person to serve their country in war (or even conscientiously object) and to return home after war. Religion grounds us as human beings, and religious affairs professionals recognize the secularity and nationalism characteristic of modernity while remaining committed to the transcendent work of our traditions.

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