

ZEALOTS RAP AIR FORCE ACADEMY

It is one the most hyped-up, politically driven scams in recent history, though aside from the Catholic League, virtually no one has labeled it as such. We are talking about the hit job on the U.S. Air Force Academy that zealots have waged against it. Much of the blame goes to Americans United for Separation of Church and State and the Yale Divinity School: they were the ones who fired salvos at the Academy, generating media interest.

Having been put on the defensive, officials at the Academy had no choice but to investigate the religious climate at the institution. The charge? Non-Christians were being treated unfairly. Indeed, 55 cases of religious discrimination were alleged to have taken place.

On June 22, an Air Force Academy panel released its findings. To begin with, it said that the much touted “55 complaints” were “in reality a collection of observations and events reported by about thirteen people, and purported to have taken place over a four-year period.” Second, what was not reported by the media were comments made by members of various focus groups that undercut the charges completely. Third, many of the alleged offenses weren’t examples of bigotry at all.

For example, in the cadets’ focus group, it was learned that “Reverse discrimination is rampant and evangelical Christians are under attack.” Some of the cadets are in despair: “The Air Force I signed up for didn’t say I had to leave my religion at the door.” Other cadets said the Academy is too “politically correct” and that “Christian cadets are now being discriminated against.” The AOCs (Air Officers Commanding) said that “the pendulum has swung too far and now open discussion is discouraged among the cadets.” And so on.

Interestingly, ten years of cadet survey data show that there

is less a problem with religious intolerance at the Academy than any other expression of hostility. Yet none of this was reported.

On June 28, the House Armed Services Military Personnel Subcommittee held a hearing on this subject. Below is the text of the letter written by William Donohue to the members of that subcommittee.

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Dear Congressman:

As one who was honorably discharged from the U.S. Air Force in 1970, and as president of the nation's largest Catholic civil rights organization, I read with great interest the report on the religious climate at the Air Force Academy that was released on June 22.

What I found most disturbing is what the media are not reporting: the fact that the most-often cited examples of bias against non-Christians do not constitute bias at all; the fact that the Academy now risks becoming a place that is inhospitable to religious expression; and the fact that many Christian cadets and officers believe that an anti-Christian environment now exists.

To be specific, for cadets to put a flyer in the dining hall advertising the showing of "The Passion of the Christ" is hardly an example of bias against non-Christians: a) no coercion was involved b) it was not a government-sponsored initiative—it was undertaken solely by cadets, and c) flyers are commonly distributed in the dining area advertising films. Indeed, the real problem is with those who want punitive sanctions against the so-called guilty parties. Such a remedy smacks of an anti-Christian bias, as well as intolerance for free speech.

Another one of the alleged examples of religious insensitivity

is the singing of "God Bless America." That this was actually listed as an example of bias demonstrates a complete disconnect from reality. Worse, it shows that patriotism is now on trial at the U.S. Air Force Academy.

That the Yale Divinity team objected to a Protestant minister at a Protestant service asking Protestant cadets to chant, "This is our chapel and the Lord is our God," proves beyond a doubt the rank bigotry of this group. To make such a charge fully discredits anything these individuals have to say about any alleged religious bias.

All of this would be comical if it were not taken seriously. Tragically, it is. Make no mistake about it, the real danger is that Academy officials are being pressured to remedy a problem which has been blown way out of proportion, the effect of which is to stifle freedom of speech about religious matters and to intimidate Christians from expressing themselves about their faith.

In short, this is a scam: ideological zealots who want to purge our society of the public expression of religion—especially Christianity—are making trumped up charges to validate their crusade.

I urge you to see through this issue clearly and not be bullied by those who would have you believe that the Air Force Academy is in need of drastic reform. Religion plays an integral role in our society and it is doubly important to most of the men and women in our armed forces. Anything that unfairly hinders religious expression will only hurt the nation as a whole.