

Recommendations from the PRJC To the Air Force Revised Interim Guidelines

I. Recommended change to paragraph 2, first sentence

“...neither officially endorsing nor disapproving any system of belief.”

- Justification: If religion can be defined as “Any system of belief to which one or more individual gives his or her first adherence”, then an atheist is properly understood as “religious”. In other words, the term “non-religious” is an oxymoron.

II. Recommended change to paragraph 3, last sentence

“...we will respect the rights of a chaplain to adhere to the tenets of his religious faith, and without any personal or professional adverse consequences, he will not be required to participate in any religious activities inconsistent with his faith, including public prayer.”

- Justification: In this situation, explicit prohibition of negative or punitive personal or professional consequences is so important that it ought not to be assumed as recognized.

III. Recommended change to paragraph 4, first sentence

“Leaders at every level bear a special responsibility to make every reasonable effort to avoid language or actions which could be construed as officially endorsing, or disapproving of any belief system.”

- Justification: No leader ever has the actual power to “ensure” what others will “construe” in their thinking.

IV. Recommended change to paragraph 4, last sentence

“Subject to these constraints, superiors and chaplains enjoy the same free exercise rights as all other enlisted and commissioned personnel.”

- Justification: The obvious exclusion of chaplains from the wording of this critical protection is unwarranted, and otherwise could be construed as excluding them from that general constitutional protection.

V. Recommended change to paragraph 6, first sentence

“Public prayer should not be offered in a manner implying government endorsement of any belief system, and while not being a required part of routine official business, should neither be forbidden, but left to the discretion of the presiding senior officer.

- Justification: The way the sentence is presently worded could be argued as prohibiting prayer at a public meeting except in the most extreme or unusual circumstances.

VI. Recommended change to paragraph 6, second sentence

“Reasonable sensitivity and mutual respect are expected of leaders in considering unusual circumstances and needs of the command”

- Justification: “Common sense” is an elusive concept, difficult to define, and even more difficult to enforce, thus constituting an unrealistic obligation.

VII. Recommended change to paragraph 6, sentence three

“While non-denominational, inclusive prayer or a moment of silence may be regarded by some as appropriate for military ceremonies, or events of special importance not undertaken for the advancement of religious beliefs, this expectation may not be construed as forbidding any phrasing of a prayer by a chaplain who believes that such phrasing is necessary in order to be faithful to his ordination vows.”

- Justification: This third sentence, as it is presently worded, is the most ominous with respect to free exercise because of what it does NOT say. This proposed revision protects the right of every chaplain to conduct the ministry of requested public prayer in accordance with his ordination vows.