

Chaplain courted trouble by playing the victim

What is it in human nature that makes us want to be victims? Why is a sense of membership in a persecuted group so seductive? If I were on Lt. Gordon Klingenschmitt's court martial board, that's what I'd ask him. I think it'd be a real learning opportunity.

Klingenschmitt is a Navy chaplain, court martialed one week ago on charges of failing to obey a direct order by appearing in uniform in a political protest. The protest was against the supposed belief that military chaplains cannot pray in Jesus' name while in uniform. It seems clear that Klingenschmitt believes himself a victim of religious persecution.

He is not alone in thinking so. A net search on his name will turn up dozens of links about the brave chaplain court martialed for praying in Jesus' name. Klingenschmitt has even attracted support in Congress. The current defense spending authorization bill is being held up due to a provision specifically authorizing military chaplains to pray "according to the dictates of their own conscience." What exactly is going on here?

What's going on, I believe, is willful disregard of the facts in favor of the ecstasy of victimization and the intoxicating possibilities of political power. It is also a sad commentary on how entrenched the culture of victimization has become in modern America. Klingenschmitt's "persecution" marks a turning point in America's new identity as a nation of victims. Al-Qaida could not have struck a more powerful blow.

If Klingenschmitt and others were truly banned from worshipping "according to the dictates of their conscience," I would be protesting right alongside them. But that's not what's going on.

Klingenschmitt has the absolute, fundamental, constitutionally protected right to pray in Jesus' name at Christian worship services where he officiates. He knows this. He just doesn't care.

Instead, Klingenschmitt was protesting a long-standing policy that prevents him from praying in Jesus' name at mandatory military functions. This is exactly what the chaplain provision in the latest defense spending bill would allow him to do.

This provision must not, and will not, stand. Even if it passes, it will be challenged



OPINION
BARRY FAGIN
Contributing columnist

immediately and ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court.

It will be held unconstitutional because 200 years of settled case law state that the U.S. government must be neutral toward all religions, as well as toward religion and non-religion. The possibility of an officer in uniform calling for an assembled infantry division to recognize the truth of the Mormon Church is incompatible with that principle.

It will be held unconstitutional because in the modern world, the image of the U.S. Army going forth

to do battle after a benediction in the name of Jesus is apocalyptic and frightening. It plays right into the hands of our enemies, and gives them enormous political capital.

It will be held unconstitutional because prominent evangelical organizations will argue against it. The National Association of Evangelicals has issued a courageous public statement calling for general, non-sectarian prayer at mandatory military formations. Clearly, not all Christians think like Klingenschmitt.

It will be held unconstitutional because the Supreme Court has long deferred to the military in matters where military judgment is required. The Department of Defense does not permit sectarian prayers at mandatory events precisely because they are contrary to good order and discipline. The military, to fight effectively, must focus on those values that all its members share. Patriotism. Loyalty. Honor. Courage, Love of country. Self-sacrifice. No faith can claim these as uniquely its own.

If Klingenschmitt is a victim, he is a victim of his own ignorance. By ignoring the distinction between mandatory and voluntary, he has set aside his faculty of reason. But as St. Augustine wrote over a thousand years ago, for a Christian to do so "is a disgraceful and dangerous thing."

Augustine's "Confessions" speak to Klingenschmitt directly. They warn that setting aside one's reason "opens up Christianity to ridicule for being unlearned."

Unlearned, and unconstitutional.

Fagin, of Colorado Springs, is a senior fellow at the Independence Institute. His column appears on alternate Thursdays. Readers may e-mail him at barry@faginfamily.net.