

## Commentary

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# The relationship between God and war

**T**here are many messages about God and war.

Religion and warfare have long gone together. Homer's "Iliad" begins with the destruction Apollo wreaks upon the Greek troops for the impiety of their commander Agamemnon. In its climactic scene, Hector, the virtuous and reverent defender of Troy, is lured to his death by Athena, the very goddess the Trojans piously worship. The lesson for Greek warriors was clear. Be pious towards all divine powers, but never expect that your piety guarantees your success.

What then do we make of the beliefs that Lt. Gen. William Boykin, deputy undersecretary of defense for intelligence, expressed in sermons in churches in Oklahoma, Oregon and Florida? Conservative and Christian commentators have traced a clear tradition of appeals by our foremost leaders to our soldiers to uphold Christian values and trust in God's will.

David Gelernter in "The Weekly Standard" (Nov. 3) quotes Abraham Lincoln, himself quoting George Washington's hopes that "every officer and man will endeavor to live and act as becomes a Christian soldier defending the dearest rights and liberties of his country." Gelernter finds uncontroversial Boykin's comments that his God is a real God, but Islamic Allah is an idol. Gelernter reasons that since our founding fathers held Christian

beliefs, saying that we are a Christian nation is no different than saying that we are a baseball-loving nation. For Gelernter, Christian nation stands for Judeo-Christian nation. Christianity after all is "a variant of Judaism . . . the work of Jews, propagated by Jews and focused on Jews." The proof is in Luke 10:25, where Jesus defines the fundamental mission of Christianity by quoting two verses from the Hebrew Bible.

Tony Blankley "thank(s) God for General Boykin" and reminds us that on Aug. 14, 1941, Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt sang "Onward, Christian Soldiers" with sailors aboard the heavy cruiser Augusta. In Blankley's view, fundamentalist Islamists are waging a jihad against the United States, so Boykin is justified in declaring a Christian counter-jihad.

Paul Strand of the Christian Broadcasting Network alone takes us to the very words of Boykin's sermon. Radical Islamists hate us because we are Christian believers and we back Israel. "Every man who signed the Constitution of the United States was of Christian faith," Boykin asks: "But why is George Bush in the White House?" His answer is that God willed it: "You must recognize that we as Americans saw a miracle unfold with the election of George W. Bush."

Boykin's views made me recall Gen. Douglas MacArthur's famous Rainbow Division Reunion speech of July 14, 1935. MacArthur saw his military service in religious terms as a high vocation. From his combat experience, MacArthur reasoned: "The soldier, above all other men, is required to

perform the highest act of religious teaching: sacrifice. In battle and in the face of danger and death he discloses those divine attributes which his maker gave when he created man in his own image. No physical courage and no brute instincts can take the place of the divine annunciation and spiritual uplift which will alone sustain him." The architectural program of West Point supports MacArthur, Roosevelt, Churchill, Lincoln and Washington. The Christian chapel dominates the grounds. But does it support Boykin?

It is not unpatriotic to be uneasy about Boykin's vision that God put President Bush in the White House, that Muslims worship an untrue god and that we must combat religious extremism with religious extremism of our own. These are not the values all Americans might want our soldiers dying for. We might do better to recognize that citizens vote and the Supreme Court put Bush in office, that Allah is no mere idol, and that giving up tolerance, moderation and humanity in favor of martial zealotry is a dangerous course.

We might consider the views of another religious soldier, World War I poet Wilfred Owen. Owen writes from the trenches in World War I (May 2, 1917): "Already I have comprehended a light which will never filter into the dogma of any national church: namely that one of Christ's essential commands was, Passivity at any price! . . . Be bullied, be outraged, be killed; but do not kill. . . ."

Owen fought and died in combat on Nov. 4, 1918.

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