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Theocracy Alert

Jesus is my co-pilot

By Bruce S. Ticker

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May 21, 2005—Air Force Capt. MeLinda Morton has joined the noble company of French Lt. Col. Piquard, Georgia Gov. Frank Slaton and the German Rev. Dietrich Bonhoeffer—all “righteous Gentiles” who suffered in their attempts to aid persecuted Jews. Eerily, Morton’s impending fate parallels that of Piquard.

Morton participated in the exposure of state-supported evangelistic harassment at the Air Force Academy near Colorado Springs; refused to denounce a report disclosing these concerns; and discussed the situation with newspaper reporters.

Evangelical Christians in responsible positions have been accused of systematic harassment for at least four years of cadets who they believe do not qualify as Christians—Jews, an atheist, Catholics and mainstream Protestants. Actually, eight Jews were among a reported 117 cadets who were victimized; 400 cadets attend the academy. An Air Force task force has been investigating.

Some accusations, as reported in The New York Times: Cadets who would not attend chapel after dinner were marched back to their dormitories in a procession called the “heathen flight;” a history professor directed students to pray before their final exam; and a football coach placed a banner in the locker room that read, “I am a member of Team Jesus Christ.”

Also, present and former cadets said in a survey that cadets who pronounce their born-again status are praised and insults were directed at subhumans . . . er, Jews, Catholics and non-evangelical cadets, The Washington Post reported. One staff chaplain reportedly warned freshmen that they “will burn in the fires of hell” if they are not born again.

Of course, these activities conform with the Bush administration’s support of religious fundamentalists, especially evangelical Christians.

In the midst of these disclosures, Morton received orders to transfer to Okinawa. More than a century ago, Col. Piquard was transferred by French military officers to Tunisia after he tried to exonerate Capt. Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer who was framed for spying in 1894.

Gov. Slaton’s political career in Georgia was destroyed after commuting Leo Frank’s sentence from death to life imprisonment. Frank, a Jewish factory manager, was falsely convicted of murdering a young girl in Atlanta and was subsequently hanged by a lynch mob in 1915. Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor and respected scholar, was executed by Hitler’s goons on April 9, 1945, after helping Jews escape from Germany.

Piquard, Slaton and Bonhoeffer were all the focus of films and television dramas decades later to depict their acts of honor. Jack Lemmon portrayed the Georgia governor in the 1988 four-hour television movie “The Murder of Mary Phagan.”

To be sure, Morton is not solely standing up to anti-Semitism since the vast majority of victims are reported to be mainstream Protestants. Morton is generally defying religious fundamentalism. A Lutheran, she was academy chaplain when her boss, chief academy chaplain Col. Michael Whittington, asked her to denounce a report from the Yale Divinity School, released to the press in April, which accused some academy chaplains of insensitivity to religious diversity at the academy.

She told The New York Times that Whittington sent her an e-mail message on May 4 dismissing her from her position as his administrative assistant, or “executive officer.” She remains a chaplain, keeps her rank and draws the same salary.

Morton noted that she received orders in March to transfer to Okinawa, which surprised her because Whittington told her last December that she would be staying at the academy through summer 2006 to complete several projects, including a religious sensitivity training program for the academy.

This controversy begs some obvious questions: How were these clowns able to get away with this lunacy for so long? These chaplains and other academy employees have bosses, namely the Air Force command and beyond that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and above Rumsfeld . . . well, take a wild guess.

This kind of conduct is not only unprofessional but against the law. Those who perpetrated these outrages should be disciplined and, depending on the severity of their acts, perhaps fired. It is the responsibility of the academy’s command to have ensured that such matters never got so far out of control.

Previous top commanders at the academy were already replaced after an investigation into sexual assault in 2003 found 150 women who claimed they were sexually assaulted by fellow cadets, according to the Times. Apparently, these activities began long before the current management took command of the academy.

Aside from President Bush, Congress’s role is to ensure oversight of the military. Hard to believe that members of Congress never received complaints about proselytizing at the academy.

Even worse, where are the religious leaders and civil rights groups actively protesting to the government? A few are, but not many.

Especially, what of support for Morton? Assuming most of these accusations are true, Morton has been acting almost alone. She deserves better. Or are we to wait until Hollywood produces a film or television drama about her martyrdom 50 years from now?

ADDENDUM—The evangelical influence at the academy is attributed to the evangelical Christian organizations that dominate Colorado Springs. Among these groups, Focus on the Family is based there. I spotted a bumper sticker in center city Philadelphia during the past week that proclaims: “Focus on your own damn family.”

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