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A witches' brew of religious discrimination

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When he was alive, the U.S. government had no trouble finding a place for Patrick Stewart, never mind his unconventional beliefs. It inducted him into the Army National Guard, issued him dog tags giving his religion as "Wiccan," and deployed him to Afghanistan. He died there in 2005 when Taliban forces shot down his helicopter. It was only later that Uncle Sam had second thoughts.

Sgt. Stewart was buried in a veterans cemetery in Nevada, and his widow asked that his memorial plaque include the encircled five-pointed star of Wicca, a religion based on nature worship. But the Department of Veterans Affairs declined, because that emblem is not among the 38 religious symbols it allows.

Eventually, the state of Nevada stepped in and said it was in charge of the cemetery and would provide the plaque, which finally was dedicated in December. But back in Washington, the VA is still treating fallen Wiccan soldiers as a terrible inconvenience.

For nearly a decade, family members have been asking for the right to put the pentacle on the gravestones of Wiccan soldiers, and so far, they have been disappointed. Last year, two widows filed a lawsuit accusing the government of unconstitutional religious discrimination. At that point, the department suddenly unveiled a proposed regulation for handling such requests.

But the department won't say whether the new policy will permit the Wiccans to use their symbol. Nor is it clear from the text, which says the department may refuse to recognize religious groups that "promote or engage in activity that is illegal or contrary to public policy," and may reject any emblem that "would have an adverse impact on the dignity or solemnity of cemeteries."

When I asked a department spokesman whether the Wiccan application would qualify under this policy, he said only that it would get "thorough consideration." The new rules didn't dissuade a federal judge from letting the lawsuit proceed.

Maybe the VA is finally ready to do the right thing. But after all the time it has spent stalling on this issue, the suspicion arises that somebody there has a major problem with the Wiccans. And it's not hard to imagine that the current secretary of Veterans Affairs

would like to delay a resolution until the next administration, so someone else would get the blame for--as the change will undoubtedly be portrayed--giving a seal of approval to an evil cult.

But the question is not whether Wicca is a good or true religion--only whether its adherents are entitled to the same rights as everyone else. The Constitution has a simple answer: Yes.

In deference to freedom of religion, the VA makes room for lots of faiths. If you're buried in a military cemetery, you can choose from the familiar (several crosses, a Star of David, a Muslim crescent and star) or the esoteric (symbols of Buddhism, Baha'i and Sufism Reoriented).

There is even room for non-believers: One approved emblem is an atom, representing atheism. During the time the Wiccans have been waiting, the VA has added several other symbols, including one for Sikhs and another for Izumo Taishakyo, a branch of Shinto.

It's not as though Wicca is any less of a religion than these others. The Pentagon, which says there are some 1,800 Wiccans serving in the ranks, allows Wiccan groups to hold services on military bases. The Justice Department treats Wicca as an authentic religion in the reference manuals given to federal prison chaplains. The IRS grants tax exemptions to Wiccan churches.

But some people imagine adherents to be a dangerous throng of witches, warlocks, devil-worshippers and virgin-sacrificers who huddle around cauldrons chanting, "Double, double, toil and trouble." Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, which filed the lawsuit, suspects the VA may be fearful of provoking the religious right.

A few years back, after a flap over Wiccan events at military installations, some Christian groups called for a ban, and lobbyist Paul Weyrich of the Free Congress Foundation declared, "Until the Army withdraws all official support and approval from witchcraft, no Christian should enlist or re-enlist in the Army."

It doesn't appear his suggestion cost the military any Christian enlistees--which suggests that soldiers and sailors of many faiths can live, work and fight together despite their religious differences. If Wiccans are good enough to die for their country, they're good enough to be treated with respect afterward.

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