

God and country: Why is pluralism so hard?

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [January 10, 2006](#) issue

Christmas 2005 may be remembered as the year arguments were revived over whether in the public square one should say “Merry Christmas” or “Happy Holidays.” Target and Wal-Mart stores were boycotted by some evangelical Christians for their practice of referring to the “holiday.” Some Christians even criticized President and Laura Bush for sending out a greeting card that said “With best wishes for a holiday season of hope and happiness.” The card had no shepherds, angels, star or manger. And no Jesus. Some in the media charged that a “war on Christmas” was being prosecuted by secularists who want Christians to deny their faith.

Leonard Pitts observed in the *Chicago Tribune* that a deeper issue is involved: “An ever-more pluralistic society [is] struggling to balance the faith of the majority with the rights and feelings of the minority.” He asked: “Why is pluralism so hard for these people?”

The seasonal issue is also related to a fundamental political challenge: simultaneously allowing for the free expression of religion and avoiding the establishment of religion. [Amy Frykholm's article](#) explores the way this challenge is being faced at the United States Air Force Academy. I am encouraged by Frykholm’s report that the air force is at least trying to address the issue.

Experience leads me to believe that the Pentagon might benefit from the kind of reflection going on at the Air Force Academy. On a recent visit to the Pentagon with a group of clergy, I was taken to the very spot where the airplane struck on September 11, 2001. I was shown, through a window, the glide path of the plane as it approached the building. I noticed on that window sill a literature rack full of tracts with titles like “Where Will You Spend Eternity?” and “Jesus Christ Is the Only Way.”

My lunch companion was the chief of Pentagon chaplains, an American Baptist and a reader of this magazine. I asked him about the evangelical tracts—How did they get there? Are they legal?

The tracts are there, he said, because an evangelical group that focuses on reaching Pentagon staff puts them there. The building is public space, he said, and evangelical Christians are free to practice their religion in it. And then, gently chiding me, he added, "When's the last time mainline Protestants thought of doing something like that?"

That was one angle on the issue. A different angle emerged when the after-lunch speaker, a civilian Defense Department employee, got up and said, "I welcome you to the Pentagon in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." I believe that the risen Christ is present in the Pentagon. But I confess that I was and am uneasy at hearing his name invoked in an official welcome.