

Codes Matter

Clarity, Representation, and Institutional Awareness

*This essay is **Part 2 of a three-part series** prompted by recent Department of Defense policy reforms concerning chaplain uniforms and Religious Affiliation Codes. Each essay examines a different aspect of how those reforms shape institutional identity, function, and trust.*

In thinking about how the military chaplaincy is understood within the force, one question continues to surface—quietly, but persistently.

How does the institution understand the religious landscape of the people it serves?

That question has taken on renewed importance following the Department of Defense's implementation of a substantially reduced Religious Affiliation Code system. According to the implementation guidance, the revised list is intended to provide chaplains with "clear, readily available information" that will better enable them to anticipate the religious support needs of service members. That is an understandable objective. The question is whether the revised system fully achieves it.

I approach this from a distance now, no longer inside the system, but with the perspective of having worked within it—trying, at the time, to understand what problems policy changes were intended to solve, and what effects they might carry.

The stated rationale for reducing the number of affiliation codes is typically framed in terms of efficiency and usability. Those are reasonable goals. Any administrative system benefits from clarity and manageability.

But compression is not neutral.

The implementation illustrates the distinction. While the institutional list has been reduced to thirty broad categories, the presence of a large, diverse, practicing religious population is still evident. Service members remain free to request a more specific religious designation on their identification tags. Individual identity, therefore, remains available as personal expression while institutional classification becomes more generalized.

When a system moves from a larger number of identifiers to a smaller set, distinctions are inevitably altered. Traditions that were once identified separately may be drawn together into broader categories. Smaller or less common affiliations may be absorbed into generalized labels. Some forms of identification may disappear altogether.

Consider the singular and broad category "Baptist" from the revised "Religious Affiliation Codes" list. The previous system recognized twenty-five separate Baptist bodies plus one generic category of "Baptist Churches." The revised system records them collectively under a single designation. Those churches remain distinct. Their beliefs, practices, histories, and ecclesiastical traditions have not become more alike. What has changed is the institutional vocabulary used to describe them.

The Baptist example is illustrative, not unique.

Whether comparing Southern Baptists with Cooperative Baptists, North American Baptists, National Baptists, or other Baptist traditions, the issue is not whether those distinctions should determine military policy. The issue is that their distinctiveness is no longer reflected in the institution's primary system of religious classification.

The same pattern appears across much of the revised list.

Each of these shifts affects how the institution sees its own population.

And in a system that relies on data to inform planning and support, what is less visible is often less understood—and therefore less likely to be addressed.

The military does not require service members to practice a particular faith, or any faith at all. But it does assume responsibility for supporting the free exercise of religion under conditions where individuals cannot easily access their own communities.

That responsibility depends, in part, on knowing who is present within the force.

Religious affiliation codes provide a working approximation of that reality. They do not define belief, and they do not capture identity in its fullness. But they inform how the institution anticipates need—how chaplains are assigned, how religious support is planned, and how emerging or underserved populations are recognized.

If that approximation becomes less precise, the institution's ability to respond may also be affected.

Which raises a straightforward question:

What problem is this change intended to solve?

If the issue is administrative complexity, then the criteria for simplification should be clearly articulated.

If the issue is data usability, then the impact of reduced specificity should be carefully evaluated.

If the issue is something else entirely, that purpose has not yet been clearly stated.

In the absence of clarity, discussion tends to fill with partial explanations—fragments that may reflect elements of the policy, but do not provide a consistent or authoritative account. And without that clarity, it becomes difficult to assess not only what is being changed, but what may be lost in the process.

The reduction may simplify institutional reporting. Whether it improves a chaplain's ability to anticipate religious support needs is less obvious. In practice, responsibility for recognizing distinctions that were once reflected in institutional data is increasingly placed on local commanders and chaplains, who must now identify those needs through observation, conversation, and direct engagement rather than through the institution's own systems of classification.

Over time, the military has moved—sometimes unevenly, but steadily—toward a broader recognition of the diversity present within its ranks. That movement did not occur by accident alone. It reflected an increasing sensitivity to the need for accommodation, and a reluctance to exclude or mischaracterize the beliefs of those who serve.

Administrative simplification is a legitimate goal. Standardization often improves consistency and usability. Those benefits should not be dismissed.

But administrative simplicity and institutional awareness are not always the same thing. The way an institution classifies its people inevitably shapes the way it understands them.

That understanding influences planning.

It influences resource allocation.

It influences religious support.

Which is why changes to those systems deserve careful consideration—not because reform should be resisted, but because institutional understanding is itself an important resource.

Clarity matters.

Representation matters.

And consequences matter.

Codes matter.

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