



Original Research

The Limitations of Religion/Spirituality (R/S) Measures: A Case Study of the US Military's Use of Spirituality as a Framework for Wellness

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Abstract: This article examines the category of spirituality and the ongoing challenges of defining and measuring spirituality in concrete and meaningful ways. It does so by analyzing the US military's incorporation of spirituality as a component of Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) beginning in 2009. Following internal backlash and broader public criticism—particularly from organizations concerned with First Amendment protections—the Department of Defense modified the program. However, it remains unclear whether these revisions substantively addressed concerns related to religious freedom or meaningfully refined how spirituality was assessed. The military's attempt to operationalize spirituality through a Spiritual Fitness Test (SFT), later renamed the Spiritual Fitness Inventory (SFI), is significant and warrants careful examination. As this article argues, the shortcomings of the SFT/SFI are not unique to the military but reflect broader methodological and conceptual challenges in how spirituality is surveyed and measured more generally. Within the specific context of the US military, the SFT/SFI raised questions related to First Amendment jurisprudence—particularly how constitutional protections for and from religion are interpreted—while also complicating claims that spirituality functions as a more inclusive or universal category than religion for capturing human experience and identity. By examining the limitations of universalist approaches to spirituality, this article invites dialogue on how scholars and institutions might refine their conceptual and methodological frameworks. Evaluating the military's assessment tool also sheds light on how public institutions in the US participate in regulating religious freedom, including how such freedom is defined and who is granted access to it.

Keywords: Spirituality Measurement, Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF), Spiritual Fitness Inventory (SFI), Religious Freedom, Military Chaplaincy, Protestant Normativity, Religion and Health, Adverse Spiritual Experience/Religious Harm

Introduction

In 2009, in the wake of US involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan and a rise in cases of suicide and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the military launched the Spiritual Fitness Test (SFT), later renamed the Spiritual Fitness Inventory (SFI). It was part of a larger Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) program designed “to deliver resilience and performance enhancement training benefits to Army members” (Department of the Army 2011, i). The SFT was an assessment tool, a survey meant to provide a measure of “Spiritual Fitness” that would highlight areas of need that the individual could work on. The military then provided training modules as resources for further “spiritual” development. The military

chaplain, a designated role meant to serve the religious and spiritual needs of military personnel (Sitek 2024), was also available to support the individual if their assessment suggested spiritual deficiency.

The SFT came under fire for several reasons. To begin with, it was a mandatory measurement that framed spirituality in theistic terms and, therefore, particular and religiously informed ways. In an American National Public Radio (NPR) story from 2011, Marky Weinstein, founder of Military Religious Freedom Foundation, claims that, in the case of the SFT, “ ‘spirituality’ is a smoke screen for religion—particularly evangelical Christianity” (Hagerty 2011). Although the argument is not fully fleshed out, it reflects a longer narrative of the growing dominance of Evangelical Christianity in the military (Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers [MAAF] 2019) and in public matters of religion in the US more broadly (Sullivan 2005). Whether or not Evangelical Christianity was to blame, in the least, some of the measures tended to describe spirituality in terminology that is by no means universal across a range of world religions, let alone the supposed universal dimension of all human experience: deinstitutionalized spirituality.

The following study considers the military’s SFT/SFI, along with existing literature that critically examines Religion/Spirituality (R/S) measures, to problematize the idea that spirituality is a universal, neutral category. Instead, spirituality often reflects situated cultural and historical assumptions. These assumptions become visible through an examination of the SFT/SFI as a case study. This article argues that the military’s SFT/SFI reveal broader conceptual and methodological problems in the measurement of spirituality that participate in regulating which forms of spirituality become legible. The wider critique of spirituality as a cultural construct relies on approaches grounded in lived religion and individual experience (Taves 2009; Knibbe and Kupari 2020; Johansson 2022). These approaches focus on the process through which individuals themselves come to identify experiences as religious or spiritual (even special or singular) (Taves 2009). The scope of this study did not include empirical validation; rather, its purpose is to model critical reflection and offer an analytical framework that may be transferrable to other contexts. Ultimately, this study invites readers to think critically about the ways normative and acceptable forms of R/S are constructed and privileged.

Where the SFT Failed: Spirituality Narrowly Framed

This critique becomes especially visible in the structure and language of the SFT (and later SFI). The concern with the earliest version of the SFT was that those who took the assessment and followed up with skill-building modules would still engage with ideas about spirituality that were narrowly framed (Hagerty 2011). In an anecdote from one individual who took the earliest version, Justin Griffith, a sergeant at Fort Bragg, N.C., Griffith explained that he “grew angry” (De Groote 2011) as he took the online survey. The assessment tool asked participants to rank statements on a scale from “Not like me at all” to “Very much like me”

(De Groote 2011). Statements like “I am spiritual...I find comfort in religion” and “in difficult times ‘I meditate or pray’ ” (De Groote 2011) use terminology more closely related to organized religion and demonstrate a preference for “religious” resources for coping as an appropriate or measurable form of spirituality. Framing spirituality in narrow, theistic terms not only limits who is identified as spiritual and, therefore, spiritually fit but also raises issues of religious freedom since it invites the individual to conform to a particular expression of “spirituality” rather than promote individual choice and free exercise. Additionally, it makes invisible or “unwell” those identities that do not see themselves reflected in the ways their spirituality is measured.

Griffith would go on to become an “opposer of religious privilege and bias in the US military” (Torpy 2011). In the following, I consider the ways a clinical approach to measuring spirituality can shroud such religious privilege and bias, and, in the case of the US military, as I will show, it poses issues that limit religious freedom and individual expression.

It is important to recognize that the SFT emerged at a time when the cultural and legal meaning of “religious freedom” in the US had already begun to shift toward the protection of “free exercise of” individual spirituality, weakening commitments to church-state separation. The military itself played a defining role in this shift. In *Katcoff v. Marsh* (1985), the chaplaincy was challenged for violating the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment of the US Constitution, which states “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The first part is commonly understood to mean that there should be a clear separation between religion and government. There was a period when the courts appeared to lean in favor of separation—what Winnifred Sullivan calls the “high separationism of the middle part of the twentieth century” (Sullivan 2014, 17), reflected in decisions such as *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) and *Abington School District v. Schempp* (1963). In the *Katcoff* case (1985), the court did not address separation but rather emphasized that the chaplain was constitutionally compliant since their work ensured the free exercise of individual spirituality for all service members wherever they might be deployed.

This case helped institutionalize a version of religious freedom that privileged individual spirituality. Although framed as neutral and inclusive, this model reflected dominant Protestant norms embedded within military culture. The SFT/SFI make this legacy legible in their survey questions analyzed later. What had earlier been more subtle, cloaked in language of universal spirituality, became rearticulated in the test as Christian-inflected values as individual wellness metrics. The result was an assessment that seemed secular and capacious but, in practice, continued to privilege a narrow, theistic understanding of spirituality. It is from within this cultural and legal reconfiguration of “religious freedom” that the military would later respond to criticism and modify the survey.

Succumbing to Criticism: Modifying the Survey

After numerous complaints and the heightened attention to and visibility of this program by organizations like the Military Religious Freedom Foundation and the MAAF, the Army published a modification of the CSF program (MAAF 2010; Department of the Army 2011). The modification said that although soldiers were still required to complete an annual survey to assess their resilience (the GAT, Global Assessment Tool), they were no longer required to complete any additional self-improvement training in the Comprehensive Resilience Module (CRM). The CRM was composed of “individual self paced training modules offered for additional training based on GAT [Global Assessment Tool] scores” (Department of the Army 2011, 2). These modules offered “additional training opportunities in the family, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions of fitness” (Department of the Army 2011, 2). The MAAF (2010), on their website, claims that with this new order, “[t]he Army has missed real opportunities and need for reform by pushing the program under the rug. This is a multi-million-dollar, command-sponsored program, ‘the one and only psychological resiliency program for the Army,’ and that cannot be overlooked by simply calling a religious indoctrination program optional.”

Many who took the initial SFT, as part of their annual evaluation, like Griffith, complained that the test relied on narrow language to describe spirituality. As a result, the military attempted to modify the language of spirituality to achieve greater inclusivity. In the “U.S. Army Public Health Command: Technical Guide No. 360,” published in December 2012, the updated SFI, previously SFT,¹ opens with the following statement:

Everyone has a lens through which he or she views and interprets the world, whether that “lens” is a religious faith, a belief system, a world view, or general outlook on life. As stated in Chapter 6-1 of Army Regulation (AR) 600-63, “When a person’s actions are different from his or her stated values, the person lives with inner conflict. This person struggles for integrity and congruity but cannot find inner peace until this struggle is dealt with. The extent to which this is accomplished is a measure of spiritual fitness.”

This assessment is intended to help you measure your spiritual fitness. Spiritual fitness is a key component of Soldier readiness and force protection. Being spiritually fit improves Soldiers’ resilience and aids their recovery from combat-related traumas. (U.S. Army Public Health Command 2012, 3)

¹ The soldier resilience program has undergone a great deal of modification since its first launch in 2009. The GAT, which the SFT and SFI were a part of, has been replaced with the “Azimuth Check,” another annual assessment tool. It is accessible to enlisted members through the ArmyFit website, where “spirituality” is still one of the five domains of resilience (emotional, family, physical, social, and spiritual) (U.S. Army U.S. Army Directorate of Prevention, Resilience and Readiness, n.d.).

Here, spiritual fitness was defined as a congruity between actions and values and the inner peace that results from this alignment. This is akin to the psychology of harmony (Delle Fave et al. 2022) and, therefore, not representative of the unique state of spiritual fitness.

Furthermore, despite this airy definition, the questions in the SFI narrowed the scope of spirituality a great deal. In the following section, I will evaluate questions from the military assessment tool by looking for leading questions or forced options, implicit assumptions, and biases (Choi and Pak 2005). I use these criteria not only to illuminate the limitations of the assessment tool but also to explore the limits of religious freedom in the US military. As I have begun to outline, this transpired at an important moment in the US military's engagement with spirituality.

Evaluating Questions for Bias and Religious Privilege

Two key examples of survey questions provide insight into the biases and religious privilege couched within their framing. One of the questions in the SFI asked, "How often do you get together with other people in wholesome activities outside of work?" (U.S. Army Public Health Command 2012, Appendix B-3, see Figure 1), providing the examples: "attending worship services, attending Family events, playing team sports, volunteering in the community" (U.S. Army Public Health Command 2012, Appendix B-3). This question appears to frame spirituality in terms of group or social activities. One activity that is named is overtly religious, while the others are non-religious. The leading example in the list, arranged vertically in the survey, is "attending religious worship," suggesting a bias or implicit assumption that religious worship is the model of wholesome group activities that qualify as an aspect of spirituality. Furthermore, as an example of a leading question, positioning "attending religious worship" as the top example can lead the respondent to focus on commonly understood "religious" group activities when answering the question.

In another question, the SFI asked, "How often do you engage in activities that build the human spirit?" (U.S. Army Public Health Command 2012, Appendix B-3). Activities listed include "Listening to music, Enjoying nature, Furthering your education, Fasting, Journaling, Praying, Giving to charity, Enjoying humor, Meditating" (U.S. Army Public Health Command 2012, Appendix B-3). In this question, there is an embedded assumption that certain activities build the human spirit without defining what this means (note the vague wording or that which remains undefined in this example). The question contains an additional implicit assumption and suggestion that building the human spirit is a positive objective. Suppose the participant taking the assessment listens to music or enjoys nature, two options listed alongside praying and meditating. In that case, the question labels what they experience without considering that individuals may not do these things to intentionally "build the human spirit." The format does not recognize the personal experience of those participating in these activities or the individual soldier's motivations for engaging in them.

By expanding spirituality to include activities not “traditionally” considered religious, the survey implicitly suggests that these activities are spiritual and contribute to wellness in similar ways. By suggesting that some daily activities are, in fact, spiritual, the survey interrupts the self-presentation of the individual taking the survey and that individual’s freedom to express their own position (free exercise).

Additionally, this question also demonstrates a forced option, as there is no neutral answer. The respondents are asked to rank the question on a scale from “Never” to “Several times each day” without a neutral option like “Don’t know” or “Not applicable.” Therefore, the question, as it is framed, leads respondents to answer about the frequency of activities that they may not consciously engage in as spiritual activities, potentially rendering a false-positive, and rating, for example, a secular atheist as highly spiritual on this question simply because they further their education or regularly listen to music. Although a false-positive in this scenario may seem benign, it aligns with a Christian universalism that contends that all people are saved or will be reconciled to God regardless of their religious beliefs or unbelief and suggests that this is a position that the US military strongly endorses. This was a theology popularized around the time of the modification of the SFT to the SFI. It was promoted most notably by the liberal evangelical Christian pastor Robert Bell who valued inclusivity and justified it theologically. That said, Bell’s universalism did not go on to become mainstream evangelical doctrine.²

USAPHC TG No. 360 December 2012

Spiritual Fitness Inventory

In each section, circle the number in the column that most closely matches your answer.

Questions	Never	Less than once a year	Four times a year	Six times a year	8-10 times a year	2-3 times each week	3-5 times each week	Once each day	Several times each day
1. How often do you get together with other people in wholesome activities outside of work?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Some examples are: • Attending service • Attending family events • Playing team sports • Volunteering in the community									
2. How often do you engage in activities that build the human spirit?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Some examples are: • Listening to music • Expressing nature • Furthering your education • Fasting • Journaling • Praying • Doing to charity • Expressing humor • Meditating									
Questions	Never	Less than once a year	Four times a year	Six times a year	8-10 times a year	2-3 times each week	3-5 times each week	Once each day	Several times each day
3. How much do these kinds of activities help refresh you?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
4. Life brings big questions. (Who am I? Why am I here? What is my purpose in life? What happens after I die? Why do I live and suffer?) etc.) How helpful are your core beliefs or values in giving meaning and purpose to your life?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

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Spiritual Fitness Inventory (continued)

Questions	Never	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
5. How much do your core beliefs or values provide you support in times of stress?		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
6. How much do your core beliefs or values influence your moral and ethical decision making?		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
7. How much do your core beliefs or values encourage you to stop and think about who you are and who you are becoming?		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
8. How much do your core beliefs or values build within you an allegiance to anyone or anything outside of yourself? (This could be God, nature, Country, Corps, community, Family, humanity, the greater good.)		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
9. How much do your core beliefs or values encourage you to be caring, forgiving, patient, gentle, generous, selfless, kind?		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Questions	Never										Many times
10. Have you ever been changed by an unusual or profound experience? (You might call this a spiritual crisis, conversion experience, mystical experience, exceptional human experience, sense of enlightenment, or a near-death experience.)		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

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Figure 1: Spiritual Fitness Inventory (SFI) Survey
Source: U.S. Army Public Health Command 2012

² Christian universalist theology was an earlier phenomenon in the history of American religion with the development of the Universalist Church in the late eighteenth century but was later also echoed in Catholic Church doctrine in the twentieth century, and again popularized in a unique form in the twenty-first century by Robert Bell’s 2011 publication *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*.

Beyond close analysis of individual questions, I believe it is relevant to note that there are no questions about negative behaviors or adverse experiences. As a result of this, the entire survey is framed around what are then assumed to be positive features of spirituality. In this way, the survey ends up defining spirituality as positive, again operating from the assumption that spirituality is an inherent good. Additionally, all questions together in the survey, as is written in the SFI, suggest that the higher the frequency of each, the better fit the person taking the survey is judged to be.

The specific framing of the questions raises important issues, but the way the questions are grouped together also offers insight into how spirituality is defined or operationalized by the SFI. The question groupings reflect three distinct categories of spirituality—practice, belief, and experience—with two behavioral questions (e.g., “How often do you engage in activities that build the human spirit?”), seven cognitive/belief-related questions, and one experiential question. The heavy emphasis on the cognitive content places spirituality more heavily in the realm of belief, a clear bias from Protestant Christianity that puts a much heavier emphasis on belief over practice. This suggests that the SFI appears to deploy the term spirituality but seems to define it ultimately as a form of Protestant private belief.

As a concrete example of the institutionalization of religious bias, the SFI helps problematize the process of measuring spirituality and leads to an analysis of the implicit bias in the premise of the survey more generally. Again, according to the SFI, spirituality is good, desirable and essential to health and well-being and, without question, military fitness. These assumptions then render spiritually deficient and vulnerable anyone who does not frequently engage in these activities, hold these beliefs, or have the experiences contained within the language and assumptions of the survey. As a result, this approach to spirituality suggests that one must be religious/spiritual in the ways the military describes in order to be well, ready, and resilient—i.e., fit for service.

The Scientific Critique

This assumption regarding the positive relationship between R/S and health is widely held and well-studied, though there is ample critique that suggests more care and caution are needed when studying the relationship between spirituality and wellbeing.

The scientific literature on the common measures of spirituality suggests there are a number of limitations, and measures need to be refined to produce more meaningful results. Some of the critiques are reflected in the analysis of the SFI, discussed earlier. However, at a higher level of concern, there are significant issues with the very correlation between religiosity/spirituality and resilience, which was part of the military’s argument for the inclusion of the SFT/SFI in their CSF program to begin with (Hufford et al. 2010). For one, the research that correlates R/S and health (both physical and psychological) remains highly controversial (Hwang et al. 2011). Several studies, in fact, caution that this link remains

tenuous at best (Hwang et al. 2011). They argue that methodological flaws in R/S surveys create issues related to construct validity and make it difficult to create accurate measures of these things. Critics explain, “not all religions express religiosity in the same ways” (Hwang et al. 2011, 610). In surveys measuring the correlation between R/S and health, R/S is often measured using behavioral indicators such as how many times a week one attends church (or religious service), which is present in the SFI, as noted earlier. In this case, Hwang et al., in their article entitled “Extending Religion-Health Research to Secular Minorities: Issues and Concerns” explain that this specific measure is problematic because (1) it does not account for a potential self-presentation bias (or social desirability bias) in which individuals overestimate attendance; (2) already healthy individuals are more likely/able to attend services; (3) some individuals attend services for other reasons, including family obligations, which are not a reflection of religiosity; and/or (4) it is possible that what is being measured is not the impact of religiosity on health but the benefits of socialization and connectedness (Hwang et al. 2011; Levin and Vanderpool 1987).

The SFI, by questioning how often an individual gets “together with others in wholesome group activities” such as “attending worship services,” continues this legacy of framing spirituality in terms of group activities and challenges whether this is an accurate or useful measure of spirituality or even if this is potentially measuring something else, like a degree of social connection rather than spirituality. There is ample research that studies the positive relationship between social connection and health (Snyder-Mackler et al. 2020; Vila 2021; Proctor and Holt-Lunstad 2025), along with the adverse effect of isolation, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic (Holt-Lunstad 2022, 2024). Additionally, in asking about attending religious services, the SFI and other measures place spiritual expression within the context of organized, institutional religion as a model, continuing a legacy that fails to frame spirituality as a distinct category from religion.

Moreover, the overtly religious examples in both questions analyzed from the SFI serve as examples of how spirituality is operationalized (Flannelly et al. 2014) in terms that align with historically Christian, specifically Protestant, ways of framing religion in surveys,³ again, such as attending religious service and prayer. Although the SFI survey added fasting, which is a central feature of the most important Islamic religious holiday Ramadan and the Jewish high holiday of Yom Kippur, it still calls on a practice that might more readily be associated with collective and organized religion, and not necessarily deinstitutionalized spirituality, as a lowest common denominator and universally human dimension of one’s spirituality. However, even the quest to distill spirituality to this point remains contested.

³ Even within the Protestant framework, there can be significant variation in how religion is experienced. Hill and Pargament call for “more contextually sensitive measures,” noting that “measures of religion and spirituality have been geared largely to Protestants and, more generally, to members of Judeo-Christian traditions (Gorsuch 1988). Although Protestantism represents the largest religious grouping in the United States, the population is becoming increasingly pluralistic religiously (Shafranske 1996)” (Hill and Pargament 2003, 70).

There is a robust “debate regarding the most accurate meaning” of spirituality but also whether a “single universal consensual definition” is even possible (Sena et al. 2021, 2).⁴ In their article “Religion, Spirituality, and Mental Health: Current Controversies and Future Directions,” Dein et al. (2012, 854) explain:

Perhaps most concerning for scientific research on spirituality and health is the largely unexamined idea that generic understandings of spirituality—devoid of history, specificity, or acknowledged tradition—necessarily have anything at all to do with the actual beliefs, practices, and experiences of “lived” spirituality and religion situated in the diverse cultural and geographical contexts of real people in the world today... There seems to be an implicit syncretistic assumption that all situated spiritualities benefit mental health. If these do, we shall only know this by conducting specific research on specific spiritualities. If we are to conduct research that engages with these loci of primary adherence, we need to read, listen, and observe much more carefully before we begin.

There are a few important things to highlight here in this assessment. For one, these researchers make clear that spirituality(s) are situated in contexts (time, culture, gender, etc.) and are, therefore, varied in expression. This complicates the notion that spirituality is a universal human phenomenon that can be measured the same way across individuals and contexts by scientific research or the military’s SFT/SFI.

The SFT and SFI are part of a continued trend in research aimed at decoupling spirituality from religion as a distinct concept (Sena et al. 2021). However, a number of key issues still remain, including (1) the two terms remain entangled in the ways we think about, talk about, and study religion and spirituality in relation to health and well-being; (2) much of the research still uses the dual term R/S (Bauer and Johnson 2019); and (3) where spirituality is detached from religion as numerically distinct, there is a lack of consensus around how to define spirituality (Sena et al. 2021). Together, these issues help explain why narrow assumptions about spirituality become embedded within survey questions like those in the SFI. They also demonstrate how measures of spirituality continue to rely on frameworks shaped by organized Western religion. In these ways, the SFI has contributed to this lack of consensus and the inability to decouple these critical terms. Furthermore, these tools rely on research that operates from the implicit assumption that there is a positive

⁴ In their 2021 article “Defining Spirituality in Healthcare: A Systematic Review and Conceptual Framework,” Sena et al. (2021) review over 150 research studies on spirituality and health and, based on this review, propose a framework that recognizes spirituality as both a plural construct and a complex phenomenon. Their framework includes multiple dimensions designed to capture the varied ways individuals engage with spirituality, offering what they describe as a “new, more comprehensive approach” (Sena et al. 2021, 8) capable of accounting for spiritual plurality across cultural and religious contexts, building on earlier frameworks such as McSherry et al. (2002) and Ko et al. (2017).

correlation between spirituality and health, and this critical assumption also makes religious trauma and adverse spiritual experiences invisible (both understudied areas) (Ward 2011; Currier and Eriksson 2017; Ellis et al. 2022), thereby invalidating the ways R/S can contribute to negative health outcomes as well as positive ones.

This analysis is meant to explore biases in the SFI, thereby complicating the process of measuring spirituality and the usefulness of the category. However, it is helpful to contextualize these biases within the evolving environment of the US military and its response to religion among its ranks.

Boundaries of Religious Freedom in the US Military and Beyond

In many ways, the SFT/SFI blurred the boundary between religion and spirituality, calling into question the survey's ability to effectively measure spirituality. Again, its use of theistic examples continues a legacy of modeling surveys that measure religiosity based on the experience of a dominant Protestant majority. More specifically, in the context of the military, the SFT/SFI were symptomatic of a narrowing approach to religion within the military that began just after the Vietnam War when many liberal Protestant chaplains left the military on moral grounds because they had disapproved of US involvement in Indo-China (Stahl 2017). As a result, more conservative, Evangelical chaplains entered to fill the void, impacting the demographics of the chaplaincy (MAAF 2019). This shift resulted in a disparity in representation between chaplains and other staff, which is only one piece of a more complex relationship between the military and spirituality. However, the narrowing approach to spirituality and its relationship to the growing presence of Evangelical Protestants in the US Military seems to echo the values embedded in these survey tools. The use of the surveys such as the Spiritual Fitness Inventory (SFI) (U.S. Army Public Health Command 2012) seems to have buffered (or veiled) the military's earlier efforts to institutionalize spirituality as a secular tool to ensure soldier fitness for service and maintain organizational efficiency.

The Army's interest in "spiritual fitness" as part of its broader CSF program reflected an effort to translate religion into a secular language of wellness and resilience. By promoting spirituality as a universal human good, the military appeared to take a neutral stance toward religion while still maintaining an underlying moral hierarchy rooted in Protestant norms. The chaplaincy's earlier legal defense in *Katcoff v. Marsh* (1985) had already established the free exercise of individual spirituality as compatible with state interests, framing the chaplain's spiritual care as essential to military readiness and, by extension, national security. This rationale blurred the line between religion and secular wellness, transforming "spiritual fitness" into both a moral and operational standard for the ideal soldier.

Thus, what appeared as a move toward inclusivity—shifting from "religion" to "spirituality"—in fact perpetuated the military's legacy of religious privilege. By reifying

spirituality as a marker of psychological health and moral integrity, the SFT/SFI operationalized a specific kind of religious subjectivity as universal. This secularized spirituality not only obscured the persistence of Protestant assumptions in military culture but also reinscribed limits on genuine religious freedom within the ranks. In this way, the military model of spiritual fitness continued to define wellness in terms that rendered some soldiers more “fit” than others, reaffirming the institution’s power to regulate R/S under the guise of resilience and care.

Conclusion

Beyond illuminating how the military’s model of spiritual fitness contributed to narrowing access to religious freedom in the US, this case study illuminates more broadly how measures of spirituality do not simply describe human experience. They do the work of defining forms of experience that become recognizable, valued, and institutionally supported. The military’s failed attempt to quantify spiritual fitness becomes a productive site for rethinking how spirituality might be engaged ethically and responsibly, without reinscribing normative assumptions that marginalize certain experiences while valorizing others. Therefore, greater attention to embodied, lived experiences and cultural context is necessary when designing frameworks intended to assess spirituality.

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Informed Consent

The authors declare that informed consent was not required as there were no human participants involved.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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