

Humanist groups applaud modernization of Armed Forces military ceremony policy

Updated policy makes permanent the requirement for inclusive, religiously neutral reflections at public CAF functions

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Janalee Morris, Executive Director, Humanist Canada

31, 2026: Humanist Canada and the British Columbia Humanist Association (BCHA) are welcoming a new policy from the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) that ensures spiritual reflections at public ceremonies uphold principles of religious neutrality.

Issued July 29, 2026, by the Chief of Military Personnel, the Canadian Forces Military Personnel Instruction 03/26, Spiritual Reflections in Military Settings, supersedes the Chaplain General's October 2023 interim direction, elevating the principle of inclusive reflections from guidance to standing policy that applies to all members of the CAF.

Spiritual reflections provide an inclusive approach for official military ceremonies by using reflections intended to be meaningful and accessible to all participants, regardless of their beliefs or worldview. The policy provides the following definition:

Spiritual reflections (réflexions spirituelles)

In military settings, spiritual reflections are inclusive public addresses to a group of individuals that nurture resilience by fostering meaning, purpose, and spiritual well-being, especially within a culture of care and service.

Note 1 – Spiritual reflections do not use religious specific language, including references to God, etc. They reflect upon lessons learned, beliefs, values, and experiences to inspire gratitude, remembrance, hope, and integrity. These principles are grounded in a respect for freedom of conscience and religious expression, while upholding the dignity and value of diverse spiritual traditions.

Note 2 – It is recognized that one can be spiritual or engage in spiritual reflection without being religious.

The instruction confirms that CAF members, including military chaplains, acting in an official capacity, must avoid words, symbols, or actions specific to a particular spiritual or faith tradition. The policy upholds the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms protections of freedom of religion and conscience, affirming the CAF's duty to create a space that is welcoming and accessible to all Canadians, regardless of their religion, worldview or life stance.

The policy applies to a wide variety of events including changes of command, ship commissioning, graduation parades, mess dinners, Remembrance Day and other institutional commemorations.

"The Canadian Armed Forces is made up of people from many spiritual/faith traditions and non-religious worldviews. This policy ensures that public military ceremonies allow every member to participate," said Janalee Morris, Executive Director, Humanist Canada. "These moves by the Canadian Armed Forces show the steps they are taking to reflect the diversity of Canadian service members."

The policy does not restrict chaplains from offering gatherings specific to their spiritual or faith tradition, nor from conducting milestone ceremonies within that context. It also permits chaplains, during counselling, to provide spiritual/faith tradition guidance when it is requested by the member. Finally, the instruction directs the Office of the Chaplain General to maintain resources and training so reflections can be delivered inclusively and with confidence.

"Canada is a diverse and secular country," said Ian Bushfield, Executive Director, BC Humanist Association. "The state's duty of religious neutrality is well established by the courts, and we appreciate institutions proactively taking steps to update their practices."

More than a third of Canadians reported no religious affiliation in the 2021 Census, a figure researchers estimate has since continued to grow. Humanist Canada and BCHA believe official military ceremonies best serve those who wear the uniform when they affirm both freedom of religion and freedom of conscience, ensuring every member can participate with equal dignity.

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