

Humanist Canada Responds to Criticism of Canadian Armed Forces Spiritual Reflection Policy

Humanist Canada issues response to statement by Bishop McCaig concerning Canadian Armed Forces' new policy on spiritual reflections at official military events.

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*Martin Frith, President,
Humanist Canada*

President and ICCMC Representative for Humanism Martin Frith has issued a response to the August 10 statement by Bishop Scott McCaig, Military Ordinary of Canada, concerning the Canadian Armed Forces' new policy on spiritual reflections at official military events.

The response challenges several claims made about CAFMPI 03/26 — Spiritual Reflections in Military Settings, particularly the suggestion that requiring inclusive spiritual

reflections at official CAF functions represents an atheistic or “closed secular” approach.

“The Supreme Court of Canada has been clear that state neutrality does not amount to atheism,” Frith said. “A government that declines to affirm the existence of God is not thereby declaring that God does not exist. It is declining to take a position — precisely the distinction the Supreme Court drew in *Saguenay*.”

In its 2015 decision, [Mouvement laïque québécois v. Saguenay \(City\)](#), the Supreme Court of Canada held that the state must remain neutral in matters of religion and belief. Importantly, the Court explicitly rejected the argument that governmental abstention from religious expression amounts to favouring atheism or agnosticism.

The new [Canadian Armed Forces policy on Spiritual Reflections in Military Settings](#) does not prohibit prayer, worship, sacramental ministry, pastoral care or religious observance within the CAF. Rather, it addresses specific events connected to official government business — such as military ceremonies and commemorative events — where CAF members are expected or required to attend.

“Religious freedom and state neutrality are not opposing principles,” Frith said. “CAF members

must remain free to practise their religions and receive religious and spiritual care. But when the Canadian Armed Forces speaks institutionally and requires or expects members to be present, the state occupies a fundamentally different position from the individuals it serves.”

The issue is particularly important given the changing religious and non-religious composition of the Canadian Armed Forces. The Department of National Defence’s 2021 Review of the Royal Canadian Chaplain Service found that 39 per cent of CAF members surveyed reported no religious affiliation and concluded that the composition of the Chaplaincy did not reflect the diversity of the population it served.

The response also disputes the Bishop’s assertion that military and political authorities consistently refused substantive dialogue about the policy. Frith notes that the issue was the subject of approximately three years of discussion and consultation involving representatives of the Spiritual/Faith Traditions represented within the Interfaith Committee on Canadian Military Chaplaincy and others.

“Consultation does not require consensus,” Frith said. “Nor does the fact that recommendations were not ultimately adopted mean that they were not heard or considered.”

Humanist Canada maintains that religious Canadians must retain their freedom of religion, just as humanist, atheist, agnostic and other non-religious Canadians must retain their freedom of conscience and belief. CAF chaplains continue to serve members according to their respective Spiritual/Faith Traditions.

“Protecting these freedoms together, rather than setting one against another, is something to be celebrated.”

[Read the Full Statement](#)

About Humanist Canada

Humanist Canada is a national charitable organization advancing humanism and supporting Canadians who seek to live ethical and meaningful lives without reliance on supernatural belief. Humanist Canada advocates for freedom of conscience, secular government, human rights, and the equal treatment of religious and non-religious Canadians.

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