

The Canadian Secular Alliance invites our government to make the national anthem secular, and thereby make it easier for all Canadians to show their patriotism



What is the Canadian Secular Alliance (CSA)?

- The Canadian Secular Alliance is a non-profit, public policy research and advocacy organization advancing church-state separation and the neutrality of government in matters of religion. We seek to represent all Canadians, religious and non-religious alike, who believe that the Canadian government should adopt public policies consistent with a secular state.
- The CSA believes in church-state separation — the idea that the government of Canada should not favour one religion over others, or religious belief over non-belief. Our commitment is to liberal-democratic principles of equality, fairness and justice for all under the law, regardless of religious belief or lack thereof.

Why should the anthem make no mention of God?

- A poll conducted by Harris-Decima in May 2008 found that 23% of Canadians say that they do not believe in any god. For Canadians under age 25, the figure was 36%.
- This puts a sizeable fraction of the Canadian population in a position where showing love for their country also entails invoking a deity whose existence they reject. Our national anthem is an important way for Canadians to show pride and respect for their country. Making the anthem secular would make it easier for all Canadians – regardless of their supernatural beliefs – to show their patriotism.

Isn't it unprecedented to alter the lyrics of the anthem?

- No. The English lyrics, originally written by Robert Stanley Weir in 1908, were altered many times before being finalized by the National Anthem Act of 1980.
- In fact, Weir's original version contained no mention of God. The God-reference itself is the product of a later alteration of the words.

Doesn't altering the lyrics of the anthem violate "tradition" and Canada's Christian heritage?

- Some traditions need to be updated to reflect the times. The reference to God in the anthem is a historical artifact from an era when Canadians were virtually all Christians of European ancestry. Since then, Canada's cultural and religious landscape has shifted significantly, and the anthem should be updated to reflect this reality.

What specific change is the CSA proposing?

- We advocate returning to the original words of the anthem that existed prior to the introduction of the God-reference "O Canada, glorious and free" instead of "God keep our land glorious and free". Returning to Weir's original words would allow us to simultaneously update the anthem to better reflect modern Canada's diversity of beliefs, and honour an older, secular Canadian heritage.

What about the French version of the lyrics?

- The French lyrics to O Canada contain extensive references to the religious imperialism that was widespread at the time they were written: “As in thy arm ready to wield the sword, so also is it ready to carry the cross”, and “Thy valour steeped in faith”. Unlike the English lyrics, which can easily be made secular by returning to their original version, the French lyrics will require significant modification. This is a topic for a separate national debate.

Isn't this a trivial, symbolic matter?

- Symbolic, yes. But trivial, no. The mention of God in our anthem is often cited as evidence that Canada is a “Christian nation”, and used to argue for substantive public policies — for instance, the public funding of Catholic religious schools, or the public subsidy of organizations whose only purpose is to advance religious belief. Consequently, “trivial” issues of symbolism become relevant to highly non-trivial debates about government policy.

Shouldn't non-believers just accept the will of the religious majority?

- To our knowledge, the Canadian government takes no official position on whether God exists, or if he does, which organized religion speaks for him. If Canada truly is a secular nation, its laws and public institutions should reflect that fact.
- If, on the other hand, Canada were to formulate public policy based on the religious beliefs of the majority, it would have no basis for criticizing the repression of religious minorities and non-believers in theocratic regimes around the world.

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