

The Canadian Secular Alliance urges our government to protect the rights of atheists and the non-religious by expanding the mandate of the Office of Religious Freedom



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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.

Are atheists and the non-religious persecuted internationally?

- Yes. Atheists can be put to death for leaving a religion (apostasy) in thirteen countries, and can be imprisoned for it in seven others.ⁱ People can be put to death in six countries for the expression of ideas that conflict with religious doctrine (blasphemy), and can be imprisoned for it in 41 others. Other restrictive laws make it illegal to identify officially as an atheist, prohibit the founding of humanist organizations, and criminalize expression of secular humanist values.ⁱⁱ Some governments openly incite hatred and violence against the atheist or non-religious communities, or do not prosecute those who have attacked and murdered atheists or the non-religious. For instance:
 - Saudi Arabia has passed a set of laws declaring atheists to be terrorists on par with Al-Qaeda.ⁱⁱⁱ Raif Badawi, a Saudi Arabian blogger, was sentenced to ten years in prison and 1,000 lashes in May 2014 for creating a website insulting Islam.
 - In Indonesia, 30-year-old Alexander Aan was jailed two years for posting to Facebook “god does not exist.”
 - In Pakistan in July 2012, a man accused of blasphemy was burned alive by a mob after being dragged from a police station.^{iv}
 - In 2013, mobs of Islamists rioted in Bangladesh, demanding the execution of “atheist bloggers,” resulting in several deaths, many injuries, and government crackdown not of rioters but of accused atheists.^v
- These are just a few examples of what atheists and the non-religious face in certain parts of the world. Meanwhile, surveys show that globally atheists are among the most reviled and distrusted minority group.^{vi}

Isn't the mandate of the Office of Religious Freedom (ORF) already broad enough to cover atheists and the non-religious?

- The ORF has a mandate to promote freedom of “religion or belief”. However, the mandate should explicitly recognize the responsibility to promote the freedom to be an atheist or to be non-religious. Speaking about the ORF, Minister John Baird declared:

“We don't see agnosticism or atheism as being in need of defence in the same way persecuted religious minorities are. We speak of the right to worship and practise in peace, not the right to stay away from places of worship.”^{vii}

- This type of comment from government representatives responsible for this office is ill-considered, inappropriate and factually incorrect. Many atheists face death, prison, or fines for choosing to no longer identify as religious, and are in need of advocates and defenders. Canada should make clear its commitment to those imprisoned for their beliefs by making its government's commitment to atheists and the non-religious persecuted internationally explicit in the mandate of the Office of Religious Freedom.

Isn't it important to defend freedom of religion?

- Religious minorities facing persecution definitely deserve our support. But freedom of religion is one of several fundamental freedoms that must be protected, alongside freedom of conscience, thought, belief, opinion, expression, assembly, and association. Moreover, religious individuals and groups are not entitled to more protection than the non-religious. All fundamental freedoms enshrined in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* are important and all must be defended and promoted abroad if Canada is to be a leader in democracy and human rights.
- In certain cases freedom of religion is perceived as coming into conflict with other fundamental freedoms or human rights. In the case of blasphemy, for example, those in positions of power may claim it is their right to deny freedom of speech to others. In other cases, believers might demand special accommodations or exemptions to laws that would not be available to non-believers. The ORF risks tacitly condoning favouritism or religious privilege if it does not speak to the relationship between freedom of religion and other equally important freedoms and rights.

Has Canada and the Office of Religious Freedom done enough to protect atheists and the non-religious who are persecuted worldwide?

- No. Although the ORF in its public statements often explicitly mentions minority populations that are oppressed, it has never once referenced a case of atheists or the non-religious being the target of violence from civil and state groups. The ORF should consistently oppose apostasy and blasphemy laws including where these are used to imprison and execute atheists or the non-religious.

How can the Office of Religious Freedom send a clear message that it works to defend the rights of all people, including atheists and the non-religious?

- The ORF can
 - Explicitly include defending the rights of the non-religious in its mandate, including the right not just to change religion but to leave religion entirely in favour of atheism;
 - Expand its mandate to include the advancement of all fundamental freedoms under Section 2 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*; and
 - Issue statements on behalf of persecuted atheists or non-religious people.

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ⁱ <http://iheu.org/you-can-be-put-death-atheism-13-countries-around-world/>

ⁱⁱ For a country by country analysis of the persecution of the non-religious, see the International Humanist and Ethical Union's report *Freedom of Thought 2013: A Global Report on the Rights, Legal Status, and Discrimination Against Humanists, Atheists, and the Non-Religious* at <http://freethoughtreport.com/download-the-report/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2594139/Saudi-Arabia-declares-atheists-terrorists-new-laws.html>

^{iv} <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/22/us-pakistan-blasphemy-idUSBRE8BL03R20121222>

^v http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/18/bangladesh-bloggers-death-threats_n_3294831.html

^{vi} <http://www.publicaffairs.ubc.ca/2011/11/30/ubc-study-explores-distrust-of-atheists-by-believers/>

^{vii} http://www.international.gc.ca/ministers-ministres/baird_religion_sept_2012.aspx?lang=eng