

The Canadian Secular Alliance favours ending the practice of conducting official prayers during government meetings



What is the Canadian Secular Alliance (CSA)?

- The CSA is a national organization of Canadians who believe 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 public prayers during official government meetings be prohibited?

- The principle of separation of religion and state safeguards the rights of all in our pluralistic democracy. The legitimacy of the offices held by elected officials is granted by the electorate, a diverse body that incorporates a growing contingent of religious minorities, non-believers and the non-religious. Public prayer by government officials at the outset of government business implies endorsement of faith, and relegates those who adhere to different or no religious traditions to the status of outsiders. This is a violation of the religious liberty of minorities.

Shouldn't government institutions reflect the fact that a majority of Canadians are Christian by supporting Christian prayer in governmental affairs?

- No. *The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* protects minorities from the tyranny of the majority. A Christian majority does not render acceptable state-sanctioned religiosity. Canadian courts have consistently ruled that religious observance cannot be mandated by policy or social pressure in public schools and public workplaces. In the 1988 case of *Zylberberg v. Sudbury Board of Education*¹, the Ontario Court of Appeal ruled that the use of the Lord's Prayer in opening exercises in public schools offended Charter section 2(a). Similarly, public sector workplaces may not be places of religious evangelism.
- The Canadian Secular Alliance believes this principle clearly extends to government meetings at federal and provincial legislatures, as well as municipal councils. These are seats of representative public power where one and all are welcome equally and without prejudice. It is therefore inconsistent for any government official to participate in a ritual that singles out one particular group for special attention at the start of each government session.

Would the removal of religious prayer simply replace the imposition of Christianity with the imposition of atheism on government and the public?

- No. Secularism in the form of a lack of religious prayer does not equate to atheism. The Canadian Secular Alliance does not support replacing a Christian prayer at the start of governmental meetings with a message explicitly denying the existence of all deities. The CSA calls for *neutrality*, through the removal of public prayer, which is not equivalent to pushing atheism on society.
- While mayors, elected officials, government employees and members of the public can pray as they please, government resources and public institutions should not be used to advance religion. Public prayer crosses the line when government representatives incorporate prayer into the business of a government meeting and call on all citizens to join them in a religious ritual. An individual's right to

pray, which the CSA supports, does not translate into the privilege of imposing that religious tradition upon the rest of society.

Do public prayers coerce others into participating?

- Yes. In theory, elected officials, or members of the public in attendance, may opt to withdraw from a public prayer session. In practice, however, those who do not share the belief system endorsed by the prayer are forced to make an impossible choice. Either make their minority views public and risk the prejudice of their peers by their conspicuous absence in prayers, or accept coercion into a religious ritual and provide implicit support by their participation. The Canadian Civil Liberties Association has argued that prayer in public schools for example, inappropriately acts to coerce the minority into conforming to the religion of the majority².

Shouldn't we continue the longstanding Canadian tradition of public prayers?

- No. Exclusionary behaviour does not reflect contemporary Canadian values. An appeal to tradition is insufficient to justify ongoing abuses of government power. Despite long established practices to the contrary, women now have the right to vote, children are protected from exploitative labour practices, and racial segregation is illegal, to the benefit of all.
- There is also an issue here concerning the direction of multiculturalism and diversity. Cities across Canada have been acknowledging the growing communities of religious minorities by moving away from the tradition of reciting the Lord's Prayer in favour of non-denominational prayers. Meanwhile, atheists and agnostics have ballooned in number and now account for about one quarter of Canadians (one third of those under 25 years of age), more than double the number of all non-Christian faiths combined³. Since traditions are adapting to accommodate members of minority faiths, they should continue to evolve to acknowledge the even larger groups of non-religious, atheist and agnostic Canadians. The assumption that only those who believe in some higher power ought to be part of considerations of religious freedom and inclusion is no longer acceptable.

Is the issue of public prayers too trivial to worry about?

- No. The rule of law is never a trivial matter. Ontario municipalities are actually breaking the law and violating the constitution through the recitation of the Lord's Prayer, which was ruled unconstitutional by the Ontario Court of Appeal in the 1999 case of *Freitag v. Town of Penetanguishene*⁴.
- Some public prayer advocates charge that no harm results from the continuation of the prayer tradition. Even if true, one might ask what harm would come from a lack of public prayer. Cities which have removed or adapted their prayer tradition, or which have never incorporated such a ritual, have suffered no economic upheavals or crime waves.
- There is a telling irony in the assertion that *secularists* are exaggerating a trivial issue. The mere suggestion that public prayer is being questioned has frequently sparked an intense negative backlash, including death threats and intimidation from supporters of the status quo⁵. The Mayor of Saguenay, Quebec, raised over \$180,000 for a crusade to maintain his town's regular practice of opening municipal council meetings with a public prayer⁶. Advocates for public prayer clearly do not see this as a trivial matter, even while many simultaneously mock secularists for their efforts toward equality, neutrality and inclusion.
- The question of public prayer is significant to both sides because it serves as a proxy in the debate over the proper role of religion in the public square. Our society's collective view on that core question will inform more consequential issues such as taxpayer funded faith schools, charitable status for proselytizing and missionary work, and religious accommodations.
- Meanwhile the symbolic role of God in the national anthem, the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom* or in the form of public prayer serve as potent weapons in the arsenal of the conservative Christian to argue that ours is a "Christian nation." Despite the multicultural and secular character at

the heart of our legal and political traditions, attempts to placate the conservative Christian community by throwing seemingly harmless “symbolic” bones in their direction are transformed into talking points in efforts to advance public policies which undermine church-state separation, religious liberty and minority rights.

Is the best solution to move from a Christian prayer to multiple, rotating prayers?

- No. This approach is fraught with difficulties of principle and practice. David Barrett has documented over 10,000 different religions, 150 of which have at least one million followers⁷. If this approach were to be taken, the government would be put in the untenable position of determining which are “valid” religions, and furthermore deciding upon an appropriate representative from each religious community to conduct the prayer. The government would therefore become responsible to permanently monitor demographic changes so that rotating prayers match the composition of the population of the day. This process would be vulnerable to constant, justifiable complaints. The logistical and moral hazards associated with rotating prayers of various faiths are good examples of why it is inadvisable to mix religion and government.

If rotating prayers are utilized, is a moment of silence an adequate way to acknowledge the non-religious?

- No. The rotating prayer system, while flawed, has as its understandable goal to provide an opportunity to acknowledge and reflect on the contributions of particular individual religious communities. A moment of silence *ignores* rather than acknowledges the existence and contributions of atheists, agnostics and the non-religious community. Where a rotating prayer system is utilized it must incorporate atheist, agnostic and non-religious citizens in a meaningful and substantive way.

What is the best solution?

- The Canadian Secular Alliance favours the ending of government prayer without replacement. If it is deemed necessary to mark the significance of the occasion, a civic pledge would be a neutral and inclusive approach. A pledge made by the elected to the electorate, who vest elected officials with their power and responsibility, could be interpreted individually and anonymously as either a religious oath before god or a secular affirmation. This is akin to the same personal and anonymous choice one makes when deciding either to swear or affirm at the ballot box. Government would not be in the business of explicitly or implicitly endorsing religion or non-belief.

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¹<http://www.canlii.org/en/on/onca/doc/1988/1988canlii189/1988canlii189.html>

²http://ccla.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/CCLA_s-Written-Submissions-R.C.-FINAL.pdf

³Canadian Press commissioned Harris Decima to conduct a poll, results published in this toronto star article http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2008/05/31/one_in_four_dont_believe_in_god_poll_finds.html

⁴<http://www.canlii.org/en/on/onca/doc/1999/1999canlii3786/1999canlii3786.html>

⁵<http://metronews.ca/news/saskatoon/126742/local-man-reports-threats-after-filing-human-rights-complaint/>

⁶<http://www.lapresse.ca/actualites/justice-et-affaires-criminelles/201107/12/01-4417242-priere-a-saguenay-jean-tremblay-a-recueilli-181-000-.php>

⁷<http://www.religioustolerance.org/retrue.htm>