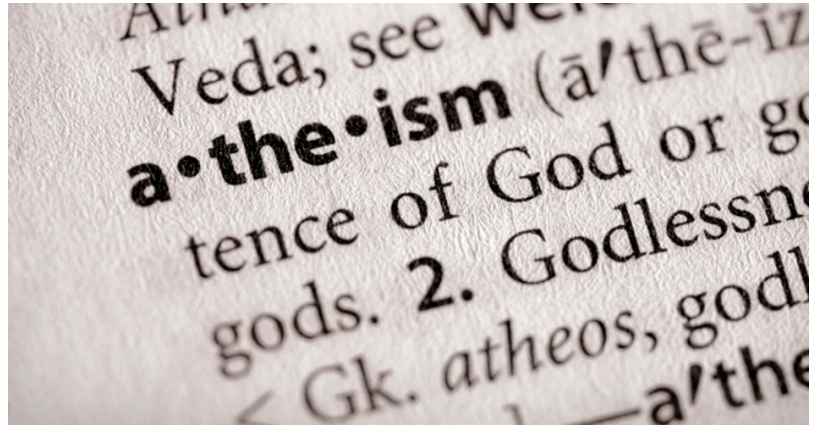




Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on July 25, 2013

## Atheists Lobbying for Their Own Military Chaplains

Believe it or not, a campaign is gaining steam to introduce atheist chaplains into the ranks of the military's spiritual counselors. Last month Democrats in Congress sponsored an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) that would have allowed for godless chaplains, but, thankfully, it went nowhere. Now, reported [Fox News](#), more level-headed legislators have introduced another amendment that would require chaplains to be aligned with a faith tradition — such as Christianity or Judaism.



“When it comes to the idea of an atheist chaplain, which is an oxymoron — it’s self-contradictory — what you’re really doing is saying that we’re going to replace true chaplains with non-chaplain chaplains,” said the new amendment’s sponsor, Rep. John Fleming (R-La.) “It’s just total nonsense, the idea of having a chaplain who is an atheist.”

But Jason Torpy of the Military Association of Atheists and Free Thinkers “claims that 23 percent of those in the military ranks assert no religious preference,” reported Fox News. “And he argues chaplains are not providing enough ‘positive outreach and support’ in the way ‘they do for all of those beliefs that aren’t their own.’”

Some have suggested that the atheists call their military personal advisers something other than chaplains, to keep from confusing them with those who provide truly spiritual counsel. Rep. Doug Collins (R-Ga.), who is also an Air Force chaplain, told Fox News that he has personally dealt with atheists in his capacity as a chaplain, and in his opinion, his role in those cases boiled down to simply offering a sympathetic ear. “What I have found is so many times people in our world today just need someone to listen,” he told Fox. He said, however, that atheist soldiers don’t need to have their own chaplains, and those lobbying for such a position “need to come at it differently.... I think there’s plenty of opportunities for them to talk.”

But it is clear that those lobbying for the cause will be satisfied with nothing less than the position of a full military atheist chaplain. Atheist Torpy insisted that real chaplains aren’t meeting the needs of atheist soldiers these days, and he noted that the IRS, the one organization he thinks really carries weight in the debate, has recognized at least one atheist group, the Humanist Society, as a bona fide religious organization. “Basically, the standard is to be recognized as a church by the Internal Revenue Service,” he said.

According to [Religion News Service](#), 38-year-old Jason Heap meets all the requirements to be an “atheist” chaplain, “with master’s degrees from both Brite Divinity School and Oxford University. His paperwork is complete. He passed the physical tests and has been interviewed by a Navy chaplain.”

The only thing Heap lacks is an endorsement from a religious organization approved by the U.S. Navy, the branch in which he would like to serve. He does, however, have an endorsement from the Humanist Society, which believes “in the positive power of human potential, but not necessarily in God,” noted



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Religion News Service. And as Torpy pointed out, that group has gotten the approval of the “higher powers” at the IRS.

But that’s not good enough, insists Congressman Fleming, because by definition “a chaplain is a minister of the faith, someone who believes in a deity of a spiritual life who is assigned to a secular organization,” he said.

One important group which has spoken up in opposition to the idea is the [Chaplain Alliance for Religious Liberty](#), a group of some 2,000 retired and active military chaplains. “Chaplains have to be endorsed by a recognized religious group that believes in a deity in order to offer faith-based ministry,” noted the group’s president, retired U.S. Army Reserve Chaplain Ron Crews. He noted that while a “fringe minority” may want to change the rules, “the very nature of the word ‘chaplain’ suggests that the individual possesses a belief in God and a desire to minister to spiritual needs.”

Crews noted that the motto for the U.S. Army chaplains is Pro Deo et Patria — “For God and Country,” adding that “bringing God to soldiers and soldiers to God has been our ministry since George Washington founded the chaplain corps on July 29, 1775.”

He commended Rep. Fleming and “those in Congress who understand this crucial ministry” for proposing and supporting the NDAA amendment that would effectively end the notion of an atheist chaplaincy.



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