



Written by [James Heiser](#) on November 15, 2011

Atheist Seeks to Become Military Chaplain

During the defense of Bataan in 1942, an American chaplain, Fr. William T. Cummings, is reported to have declared, "There are no atheists in the foxholes." But if one Army intelligence officer has his way, there will soon be chaplains to serve those atheists when they are not in foxholes. Capt. Ryan Jean is seeking to become a military chaplain who will serve his fellow atheists in the Army — an ironic course of action which raises fundamental questions about the role and purpose of the military chaplaincy.



Jean's pursuit of service in the chaplaincy ostensibly began when questions regarding a psychological evaluation brought him to the post chaplain. An article for the *Los Angeles Times* explains that it was Jean's belief in the purposelessness of his own life that brought about the events leading to his determination to become a chaplain:

Capt. Ryan Jean wanted to perform well on the Army's psychological evaluation. But he also wanted to answer the questions honestly. So when he was asked whether he believed his life had a lasting purpose, Jean, an atheist, saw no choice but to say no.

Those and other responses, Jean says, won him a trip to see the post chaplain, who berated him for his lack of faith.

"He basically told me that if I don't get right with God, then I'm worthless," said Jean, now an intelligence officer at Ft. Meade. "That if I don't believe in Jesus, why am I in uniform, because this is God's army, and that I should resign my commission in order to stop disgracing the military."

Jean says experiences such as that confrontation three years ago, when he was serving at Camp Arifjan in Kuwait, have spurred him to seek Army recognition as a humanist lay leader — on par with Christian, Jewish and Muslim lay leaders who help military chaplains minister to the troops.

According to the United States Army, the requirements for serving as in the Army Chaplain Corps are relatively straightforward, and — as it typical of a post-modern, post-Christian society — largely ambivalent to the actual beliefs adhered to by potential chaplains. According to the [recruitment requirements](#) listed at [GoArmy.com](#):

- You must obtain an ecclesiastical endorsement from your faith group. This endorsement should certify that you are:
 - A clergy person in your denomination or faith group.
 - Qualified spiritually, morally, intellectually and emotionally to serve as a Chaplain in the Army.



- Sensitive to religious pluralism and able to provide for the free exercise of religion by all military personnel, their family members and civilians who work for the Army.

The defined requirements for serving as an Army chaplain include a certain ambivalence regarding proselytism on behalf of one's own religious beliefs; being "sensitive to religious pluralism" is a *sine qua non* for service as a chaplain — but so is being a "clergy person" of a particular "denomination or faith group." Being a chaplain means that one must be an adherent of a particular "faith group." However, at the same time one must also be willing to restrict one's advocacy of such beliefs to the extent that it does not intrude on the beliefs of others.

Religious pluralism is something that has become an integral part of service in the chaplaincy. Thus, according to 2009 Army Regulation 165-1 ("[Army Chaplain Corps Activities](#)"), "Army Chaplains represent faith groups within the pluralistic religious culture in America and demonstrate the values of religious freedom of conscience and spiritual choice." Therefore, among the reasons listed for the "suspension or dismissal" of a chaplain is "a disregard for the pluralistic environment of the Army."

However, a chaplain is still required to have an "ecclesiastical endorsement" from a "faith group" listed with the Armed Forces Chaplains Board. Furthermore, chaplains are required to have extensive, and explicitly religious, education on a postgraduate level. Therefore, according to Army Regulation 165-1, the requirements for appointment as a chaplain includes:

Successfully complete a degree program of graduate professional study in theology or related subjects. Total required hours must not be less than an aggregate of 72 hours, of which 1/2 must be in the fields of theology/religious philosophy, religious ethics, general religion, world religions, the practice of religion, and a faith group's foundational writings. The graduate professional study requirement can be met only at a graduate school listed in the current edition of the American Council on Education's (ACE) Accredited Institutions of Postsecondary Education.

Thus, at the core of even a post-modern military chaplaincy are the requirements that chaplains (a) are clergy serving a governmentally-recognized "faith group" and (b) that chaplains have received an advanced education in the beliefs of their "faith group."

The quixotic quest of atheists to receive their own military chaplains runs counter to the history of the chaplaincy, and the definition of chaplaincy embedded in military regulation. As noted by the *Los Angeles Times*:

Religion — specifically Christianity — is embedded in military culture. The Chaplain Corps traces its origins to the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War. Until the 1970s, the service academies required cadets to attend chapel services. Nightly prayers still are broadcast throughout Navy ships at sea.

Fewer than 10,000 of the 1.4 million active-duty members of the armed forces identify themselves as atheists or agnostics. Atheists say many more are hidden among the 285,000 who say they have no religious preference.

Debates about hypothetical "hidden" atheists aside, the fact that atheists and agnostic officially make up significantly less than one percent of the men and women currently serving on active duty clearly demonstrates the absurdity of a push for atheist chaplains. The calling of a chaplain is to serve the religious needs of soldiers. If atheists maintains that life has no purpose, and that all religions are false, why would they need a chaplain to perform nonexistent religious rites for them? A far more interesting set of questions are raised by the purpose of chaplains in a culture of religious pluralism: If a chaplain is



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not supposed to see the beliefs of the faith that he purports to be a matter of “life or death,” one may well wonder how seriously one should take a chaplain’s willingness to set aside such a higher priority for the sake of secular, pluralistic, concerns. A chaplaincy which has had its roots in the religious life of the American Republic since its earliest day says rather discouraging things about the current state of that republic when one of the primary requirements of a chaplain is to be religiously inoffensive.

Photo: Stained glass window, U. S. Pentagon, honoring the Four Chaplains, USAT Dorchester, 1943



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