

CHRISTIAN PRIVILEGE IN THE ARMED FORCES “BAKED IN AT THE MOST FUNDAMENTAL LEVEL”

“Pro-Christian bias is so hard wired into the British military, that it has become an inclusivity blind-spot.”

This is the view of Laurence Quinn, a retired lieutenant colonel in the Royal Engineers who served for 35 years.

While he was a serving officer, he came to consider some of the practices which the army took for granted. He found that Christianity was “part of the wallpaper” and “baked in at the most fundamental level”, and worked in to many aspects of everyday life. In 2016 this led him to write a report on the army’s blind spot towards those with no religion.

He identified three main areas to address. Christian rituals and prayers are central to collective symbolic acts, including remembrance. Chaplains come from only eight Christian ‘sending churches’; the army has appointed representatives of other religious traditions, but there is no non-religious

equivalent. And the armed forces’ language and culture reflect their institutional religiosity.

In October Quinn published an update on his 2016 report. And the following month, in an interview for our podcast, he argued that the armed forces should be open to change.

Signs of progress...

There have since been some signs of progress. Until recently the queen’s regulations effectively made it impossible for atheists to become commanding officers. They also required soldiers to get permission to change religion, and said the “reverent observance” of religion in the army was of the “highest importance”.

But these unfair and illiberal requirements were removed in 2019 following long campaigning efforts from armed forces members.

...But there’s far more to do

But the progress so far is tentative at best. For example, the regulations have been updated to say soldiers may not be compelled to attend acts of religious observance against their wishes. But another clause says commanders may order a parade that includes a religious service, which soldiers are expected to attend.

Christianity still holds a disproportionate sway over an increasingly irreligious and religiously diverse army.

In Laurence Quinn’s words, it’s time to “put on a fresh pair of eyes” and look again at the army’s attitude to including non-religious people.

And that should also prompt wider questions over the relationship between religion and state in Britain.

“There’s no need in the Geneva Convention to give your religious affiliation. In fact it’s protected by GDPR. And yet we hand this information over to any possible captor. I know one Jewish soldier who didn’t dare put ‘Jew’ on his ID disc.”

ON ID DISCS WHICH SOLDIERS WEAR, AND WHICH INCLUDE DETAILS OF THEIR RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

“Many soldiers would stand on parade in respectful silence while a Christian ceremony is going on. I felt distinctly not included in my unit’s remembrance of its fallen comrades, and I’m not the only person who felt that way.”

ON REMEMBRANCE

“Only Christians from a select group of sending churches can be chaplains in regular army units... There’s absolutely no good military operational reason why that should be the case.”

ON CHAPLAINCY



Listen to episode 60 of our podcast: Atheists in foxholes – religion and the army, with Laurence Quinn

