

Ep 60: Atheists in foxholes – religion and the army

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0:00:07.840,0:00:11.040

"There's no doubt that the army, in particular, is institutionally

0:00:11.040,0:00:15.920

Christian and that leads to a number of problems when it comes to inclusivity."

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You're listening to Episode 60 of the National Secular Society podcast produced by Emma Park.

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There are many institutions in Britain whose entrenched religious characteristics are out

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of step with our increasingly non-religious and secularised population. Among these are

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the Monarchy, the Church of England and, closely linked to both, the armed forces.

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In this episode I'm joined by Laurence Quinn, a civil servant, who formerly worked for 35 years in

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the army rising to the rank of lieutenant colonel with the Royal Engineers. During the course of his

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service Laurence came to the realisation that he had no religion. This led him to explore and

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question the privileged status of Christianity in the rituals and culture of the army.

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He will be speaking to me about the chief ways in which Christianity is ingrained in army practices

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and how this can make non-Christian and especially non-religious service men and women feel excluded.

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We will also be exploring the reasons why the army continues to maintain its Christian character

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despite indications that an increasing proportion of its members have no religious belief at all.

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Emma Park (EP):

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Lawrence Quinn (LQ) welcome to the podcast.

(LQ): Thank you very much for having me. (EP):

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Let's start with a brief outline of your career in the army from when you started to

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when you finished. (LQ): Okay I joined the army in January of 1983. I was commissioned into the Royal

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Engineers and I retired in January of 2018 as a lieutenant colonel. In my 35 years I've served in

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operations in Northern Ireland, the Balkans, Iraq and Afghanistan, but in my other duties' travels

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all around the world. For the first few years I was a combat engineer and then did bomb disposal

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and after about 10 years I became a chartered civil engineer and was an

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infrastructure specialist for most of my time in the army: camps; airfields; that sort of thing;

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and I've got a Master's degree in weapons effects on structures. (EP): How was it that you became

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interested in the question of religion in the army? (LQ): Like many people I wasn't really

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interested in sort of religion or religious issues, I was raised a Catholic but, you know,

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by the time I got sort of like late teens, early 20s, I just didn't believe. It just didn't stick.

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The Earth was, you know, 4.5 billion years old not 6,000 years old and just all those animals

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in the ark? Yeah I just didn't believe it. I never really scrutinised my beliefs. I just,

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I think now in hindsight, I was probably a fuzzy believer maybe as I did moves: I didn't sometimes;

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I did sometimes; I didn't ... it was just kind of not much of an issue for me really but that

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kind of changed for me in 2006 on the tour in Iraq. It was really quite a difficult tour,

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tremendous pressure on me, and it was really quite stressful and I found that I prayed.

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Which was really odd because I was praying to a god that I didn't really think existed. And

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it was just an odd feeling and it didn't really help. At the end of my time in Iraq I thought:

0:03:15.440,0:03:21.120
"Right that's it. I'm going to, I'm going to look into this. Why did I pray? What's the argument for

0:03:21.120,0:03:25.200
the existence of God? I'll sort this out once and for all. I'll look at this part of my life and and

0:03:25.200,0:03:32.160
get a grip of it.". And so yeah I started reading

up on things and doing research and it led me into

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you know how we form beliefs, critical thinking, the evidence and the argument for God, philosophy,

0:03:37.840,0:03:41.600

morality, gender equality. You know, I'm a middle-aged engineer. It's just kind of not the

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place that you'd normally be you know, But it was really quite an eye opener and it's a fascinating

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subject looking more and more interested in the subject. Some way through the process there's

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no white silver bullet. There's no one thing but somewhere through I came to realise that I'm an

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atheist. There's no evidence to support belief in God. But also that I was a humanist. If you

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describe you know what do I believe, then Humanism probably best captures how I do feel people

0:04:12.080,0:04:18.080

should and shouldn't ought to behave. So the whole process though made me completely relook

0:04:18.080,0:04:23.520

at you know everything from what do I define as 'goods', to what my values, look at myself and

0:04:24.480,0:04:30.560

it gave me a fresh pair of eyes. And in doing that I was looking at what the army was doing

0:04:30.560,0:04:36.000

you know it wasn't just looking at me and it made me realise just you know looking at the practices

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we take for granted there's no doubt that the army in particular is institutionally Christian and

0:04:41.040,0:04:46.640

that leads to a number of problems when it comes to inclusivity. (EP): For you just on the point of

0:04:46.640,0:04:53.200

your change to being an atheist or humanist, were there any particular books you read or was there

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any particular sort of defining moments which made you have that change? (LQ): I don't think

0:04:57.280,0:05:03.280

there was one potential framework but I remember reading Richard Dawkins's "The god delusion" and

0:05:03.280,0:05:07.360

I was reading on the train. I was thinking: I read

a paragraph; I put it down and hid it; I thought:

0:05:07.360,0:05:13.520

"Did people hear my thoughts out loud?". You know

it was quite shocking to hear that. It became,

0:05:14.880,0:05:19.600

it gave permission to think that God didn't exist. I think that's what it did. But it

0:05:19.600,0:05:26.800

didn't make me an atheist or anything, it just gave me permission to actually question things

0:05:26.800,0:05:30.080

that you just you know - there's wallpaper in your mind, things you are just used to all the

0:05:30.080,0:05:35.360

time - and then it kind of gave me an opportunity to really look at things. (EP): And you just,

0:05:36.160,0:05:40.960

it hadn't occurred to you or it was just that no one in the army questioned the existence of

0:05:40.960,0:05:44.400

God before or among people you were with? (LQ): No, it just wasn't something that

0:05:44.400,0:05:49.360

came up. As hey it's just kind of routine and I'll probably search for some of those points

0:05:50.000,0:05:54.560

as we go along in the interview about why it is.

It's just, it's just part of the wallpaper, just

0:05:54.560,0:05:59.600

the things that we do normally, just traditional things and it wasn't ever really an issue

0:06:00.880,0:06:07.120

you know. It just came up but it's they say that

process of examination of you know study, thought,

0:06:07.120,0:06:12.000

reflection, critical thinking that got me to where I was. To make it clear though I'm not

0:06:12.880,0:06:19.600

anti-religious per se you know. My study taught me the value of having you know solid belief and

0:06:19.600,0:06:23.840

I can see how it buttresses people against stress and in times of crisis, particularly

0:06:23.840,0:06:28.960

on operations. It's just that you don't need, it doesn't need to be a religious one, you can have

0:06:28.960,0:06:35.600

a perfectly good sort of personal ethos and belief that isn't necessarily religious to get me through

0:06:35.600,0:06:42.480

difficult times. (EP): When you found yourself praying in Iraq was that in a situation of actual

0:06:42.480,0:06:49.600

live combat? (LQ): No, remember I'm an engineer so I was doing, I was writing live business cases

0:06:49.600,0:06:54.720

for airfields and camps to be built. And yes I was under rocket attack underneath my desk whilst I

0:06:54.720,0:07:00.320
was writing it but I wasn't sort of, you know,
at
bayonet point with the Queen's enemies. But
it was

0:07:00.320,0:07:05.760
hazardous and people were killed and I
remember
one evening leaving the headquarters in Iraq
and

0:07:06.880,0:07:10.560
it was really late, about ten o'clock at
night, just been writing more business cases

0:07:10.560,0:07:15.360
and I stopped to talk to the guard and he was
in, a like a protected 'sangar' as we called it,

0:07:15.360,0:07:20.000
like a sentry post. And I was in the mouth
of this sangar and the attack alarm came,

0:07:20.000,0:07:25.840
went off with being attacked so I hit the deck
and
just then a round landed, a mortar round
landed,

0:07:26.480,0:07:30.640
really close to where we were. I could hear
the
thrack thrack thrack of the fragments you
know

0:07:30.640,0:07:34.320
as they whizzed into the side of the sangar
and
if I hadn't stopped to talk to the guard I'd
have

0:07:34.320,0:07:40.240
been in the open. Then I dread to think what
could have happened. So no I'm not a sort of

0:07:40.240,0:07:48.800

SAS wheeling hero that way but nevertheless
it
was stressful for life and limb, absolutely.
And

0:07:48.800,0:07:52.240
there's a lot of pressure to get things right
because people's lives did depend on getting

0:07:52.240,0:07:59.200
these things right, and on time and no delay.
And
it was, you really work in operations and
with

0:07:59.200,0:08:03.440
even with the infrastructure, whatever,
you realise how important these things are

0:08:03.440,0:08:08.000
from sort of live point to the essentialness,
essential part of how they deliver on the

0:08:08.000,0:08:14.560
operation. (EP): So going back to your point
that
you looked back at the army and realised
that

0:08:14.560,0:08:21.280
it was institutionally Christian. I mean how far
would you say a Christian ethos does
permeate the

0:08:21.280,0:08:27.120
army in different respects? (LQ): Yes, I just
should talk let's explain: if I talk about the

0:08:27.120,0:08:31.840
army, most of the points I make are applicable
to
the other services: you have the navy and the
RAF

0:08:31.840,0:08:36.640
too. But each have their own tradition,
different

cultures. It's just in practice and statistically

0:08:36.640,0:08:42.960
the army is more religious than the other
three
services and it's kind of baked in right at the

0:08:42.960,0:08:49.280
sort of fundamental level and it's entwines
in the most basic things. I group them into

0:08:49.280,0:08:55.600
three areas broadly. There's collective
symbolic
acts including things like remembrance.
There's

0:08:55.600,0:09:01.760
chaplaincy; these are the padres who are
with
army units and also the language culture and

0:09:01.760,0:09:06.640
I call them 'the little things'. It's all three
broad areas really. (EP): Well let's start with

0:09:06.640,0:09:12.080
the collective symbolic acts and what sort of
things we're talking about here. (LQ): Yes.
well

0:09:12.080,0:09:16.800
you imagine symbolic acts can be really really
powerful and you know unfortunately they
can

0:09:16.800,0:09:21.120
mean different things to different people.
It depends on your perspective and you
know

0:09:21.920,0:09:26.880
where you're standing on these things. But
the
army is really replete with this kind of
symbolism

0:09:28.640,0:09:32.960

and all army is the same. You know it's the
way in
which we kind of motivate people and get
them to

0:09:32.960,0:09:37.440
see themselves as part of a bigger piece
rather
than individuals. I'll just give one example:

0:09:37.440,0:09:43.840
the army flag. The army got a new flag a few
years
ago and the executive committee of the Army
Board

0:09:43.840,0:09:49.840
is the top decision making body and the Army
Board
invited the Chaplain General in to bless the
flag

0:09:50.480,0:09:56.080
and he performed a Christian blessing. Now
on one
level yes, just a piece of cloth and what
about

0:09:56.080,0:10:01.440
it? But then again why did they do it? There's
no operational need to do that. They were
making

0:10:01.440,0:10:07.680
a symbolic gesture. Absolutely understand
that.
And if you're a Christian how fabulous you
know:

0:10:08.240,0:10:14.080
great you know God is supporting the army.
He's you know, he supports our endeavors.

0:10:15.840,0:10:22.320
But unfortunately if you're not a Christian, it
just reinforces for me that you know the
symbolism

0:10:22.320,0:10:27.360
to me was that this is, you may shed your
blood
with me brother but always remember this is

0:10:27.360,0:10:33.200
a Christian army, you know and you're a
guest
here, we're the hosts. That's what it says to
me

0:10:33.840,0:10:37.280
and that's the problem with symbolic
acts: they don't necessarily mean

0:10:37.280,0:10:43.680
you know what you want with everybody.
(EP): They
maybe include people but at the cost of
excluding

0:10:43.680,0:10:50.640
others. (LQ): Yes that's it, and that would be
my
objection all throughout this - is the fact that

0:10:50.640,0:10:55.760
you know providing that's a privileged
position for Christianity it does not

0:10:55.760,0:11:02.240
make for an inclusive environment. (EP): Given
that
we're coming up to Remembrance Day what
about the

0:11:02.240,0:11:07.680
significance of the way the parade or
Remembrance
services are managed in the army? (LQ): I
think

0:11:09.120,0:11:16.240
Remembrance is probably the most
important
point and where inclusivity is least

0:11:17.360,0:11:22.560

prevalent. Remembrance is particularly
important
for military personnel because remember you
know

0:11:22.560,0:11:26.480
we've served with the people who may well
have
been killed so there's a very very good
chance

0:11:26.480,0:11:31.440
that the military personnel on a parade will
know
somebody who has actually died in operations
you

0:11:31.440,0:11:36.320
know. Gone are the days when the army was
drawn
from across society and we had a two million

0:11:36.320,0:11:41.040
man army. It's a small army now and it's likely
those other professionals who will know of
people

0:11:41.040,0:11:46.560
who have actually died. There's a deep
personal
impact for many many soldiers. And they are

0:11:47.280,0:11:54.560
opportunities really for us to remind
ourselves
of the sacrifices that we as soldiers have to
make

0:11:55.760,0:12:02.080
in the discharge of our duty. We can reaffirm
our
pledge to remember our fallen and the
fellowship

0:12:02.080,0:12:07.680
we share with our memory and it's really it's
really important but also I think when we
take

0:12:07.680,0:12:12.080

part in those events we're also showing our younger soldiers that we hold their lives dear.

0:12:12.080,0:12:18.080

We do care about them and if they approach the thought should they die you know their memory will

0:12:18.080,0:12:23.920

live on within our collective consciousness in some symbolic way. So it's really really important

0:12:23.920,0:12:28.880

for soldiers in this Remembrance. It's important that they take part. It's important that they feel

0:12:28.880,0:12:35.760

a part of the act but unfortunately they're conducted you know largely as religious services.

0:12:36.320,0:12:42.480

Attendance not compulsory, but soldiers want to go and they expect to go but they're conducted as

0:12:42.480,0:12:47.840

religious military parades and Queen's Regulations for the army, which is like the army's law, allows

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for soldiers to be ordered to attend but does quite say specifically you can't order them to

0:12:52.880,0:13:00.000

take part. So many soldiers, and myself included,

would stand there on parades in respectful silence

0:13:00.000,0:13:06.320

whilst the Christian scene was going on around me and I felt distinctly not included in my unit's

0:13:06.320,0:13:12.800

activity, in my unit's Remembrance of his former fellow poem comments did not feel an inclusive

0:13:12.800,0:13:17.120

part on that and I was I'm not the only person that feels that way. (EP): You've spoken to

0:13:17.120,0:13:21.680

others or you've come across others who have a similar feeling? (LQ): Yes that's right. I mean

0:13:24.720,0:13:31.040

once I came to realise this and I started then a campaign of professional debate within

0:13:31.040,0:13:36.960

the army. So I published articles in the British Army Review, I ran a blog site on

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the intranet in the military, I gave interviews on the FPS (?), I had presentations, I did a lot of

0:13:44.480,0:13:50.880

lobbying of senior officers to try and convince people and in my, in the process of doing so

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there was no sort of survey of what people thought but I got a general sense that there was a,

0:13:54.960,0:14:00.960

there's quite a lot of people who would prefer a change and those weren't, as many that might

0:14:00.960,0:14:06.320

be as vocal as me I completely appreciate that, some more, some more vocal than me, I have to say

0:14:06.320,0:14:11.600

but on the whole a large number of people would say, probably the majority would welcome something

0:14:11.600,0:14:20.400

that remained inclusive but at the same time respected the importance and the solemnity of the

0:14:20.400,0:14:25.040

event. (EP): Sure absolutely because you know it's as you say; it's an event in which you're all,

0:14:26.000,0:14:31.280

you know it's about morale, it's about you as a group, it's about respecting people who may die,

0:14:31.280,0:14:36.400

but it's strange that if that's the case that it should be conducted from the perspective solely

0:14:36.400,0:14:42.800

of one religious group. (LQ): Absolutely; there are things known as 'regimental collects' which

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are effectively like very short prayers and so you say you know, "we are all engineers

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and effectively we promise to do good things, to behave honourably you know and

0:14:55.040,0:14:59.680

be good soldiers, for the glorification of God". Well just all but that last little bit

0:14:59.680,0:15:05.520

you know something you can join in with. And people soldiers on parade want to take

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part in a collective act and the collective act they're being offered is invariably a Christian

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collective act so a lot of them just go along with it and say "Amen" or whatever. The problem

0:15:16.080,0:15:21.120

with that is we're teaching our soldiers to pay lip service to these things. It's okay, it's okay

0:15:21.120,0:15:26.640

to say yes to solemn oaths and not really mean it, and that's just really a bad thing to do,

0:15:26.640,0:15:32.000

particularly when we want them to say that they will follow our values and standards.

0:15:32.000,0:15:35.200

And yet we say we don't worry if you don't really mean it: you can say yes, but it doesn't really

0:15:35.200,0:15:41.920

matter. You know so it's an opportunity to say solemn things, to mean things but we are missing

0:15:41.920,0:15:47.600

that opportunity by allowing people to you know by getting there and recognising that lip

0:15:47.600,0:15:53.280
service would be paid. (EP): Yes there's a basic insincerity sort of almost required

0:15:53.280,0:15:58.560
during a very solemn event. (LQ): Yeah either the words are important and mean something

0:15:58.560,0:16:02.640
or they don't and if they don't matter then why object to changing them? But I think the fact is

0:16:02.640,0:16:10.320
they should and do matter very very much. (EP): Taking your second head, this is chaplaincy, so

0:16:10.320,0:16:16.480
why are army chaplains important? (LQ): Chaplains aren't like welfare officers you know, they're not

0:16:16.480,0:16:21.920
looking after you or your families you know, if your home is being looked after and whether you're

0:16:22.720,0:16:25.920
managing debt and those sort of things. They look at something completely different.

0:16:27.200,0:16:32.960
They focus on things like pastoral, moral and spiritual elements. Really quite important,

0:16:33.840,0:16:40.080
referred to as 'the moral component of fighting power' in military speak. And they do in times of

0:16:40.080,0:16:44.480

real pressure they provide a focal point for people to look at something more important you

0:16:44.480,0:16:52.320
know and look beyond the sort of horrendousness of the current situation and they are a focal point

0:16:52.320,0:17:00.560
around which things like Remembrance is conducted. When I was in Afghanistan when a soldier died and

0:17:00.560,0:17:05.040
was flown back we'd have something called a ramp ceremony invariably a Christian ceremony.

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Interestingly in the US military they didn't; they have secular ceremonies. So I wrote an alternative

0:17:11.200,0:17:15.920
secular one and gave it to our chaplain because obviously it's the chaplain that leads

0:17:15.920,0:17:21.200
that activity. The commander will say "remember our fallen comrade" and then hand over to the

0:17:21.200,0:17:25.600
chaplain and the chaplain will conduct the ceremony and they're at an important point

0:17:25.600,0:17:31.520
when they're expressing the unit sentiment and of course they're trained and see it always through

0:17:31.520,0:17:36.720

Christianity's eyes and so we you know we want to go to ramp ceremonies we want to remember

0:17:36.720,0:17:42.240

our fallen comrades but we prefer to do it in a religiously neutral way, in a secular

0:17:42.240,0:17:48.920

way. (EP): And then did that did the chaplain adopt your proposed secular wording? (LQ):

0:17:49.520,0:17:54.640

Here's a really nice chap and he said he fully appreciated what I was trying to do and he said it

0:17:54.640,0:18:01.520

worked from a sort of a ceremony point of view but he said he said well just phrase it something like

0:18:01.520,0:18:05.120

you know: but you'll understand if I don't take it and I'll stick to the traditional way of doing it;

0:18:05.920,0:18:10.640

so I can understand I think tradition is probably the real sticking point within the military.

0:18:11.200,0:18:16.480

And it's also important to point out that the only Christians from a select group of sending churches

0:18:16.480,0:18:20.560

can be chaplains in regular army units things like the Church of England, Roman Catholic.

0:18:20.560,0:18:28.480

It's policy so it, I'm not sure if it's an army general administrative instructions perhaps I'm

0:18:28.480,0:18:34.080

not quite sure where where the rules lie, but but only people from those sending churches can be

0:18:34.960,0:18:41.120

a chaplain and they're only Christian so you can't be a Rabbi, you can't be an Imam, you cannot be

0:18:41.120,0:18:50.160

a Humanist. Only Christians can be chaplains in regular army units. Why? There's absolutely

0:18:50.160,0:18:54.560

no good military operational reason why that should be the case. (EP):

0:18:54.560,0:19:01.760

And which types of Christians? I mean presumably Church of England? What else? (LQ): Yeah they are:

0:19:01.760,0:19:08.800

Church of England. the Roman Catholic Church, Methodist, Church of Scotland, Presbyterian,

0:19:08.800,0:19:13.360

the Baptist Union, the United Reformed, Congregational, Free Church of Scotland,

0:19:13.920,0:19:19.680

the Elim Pentecostal and the Assemblies of God.

I'm not sure why those Christian churches are

0:19:19.680,0:19:24.160

chosen and not others but they're the ones known as 'ascending' churches. (EP): Yeah how would

0:19:24.160,0:19:29.040

it change your sort of experience of being in the army to have a chaplain figure who was not

0:19:29.040,0:19:35.200

a specifically Christian chaplain. (LQ): Because I think naturally personally I advocate for secular

0:19:35.200,0:19:38.640

chaplains rather than sort of Humanism. I'll probably explain that in terms of that later

0:19:38.640,0:19:45.440

on. But I think whether they're religious or not should be not the issue. The point is that they,

0:19:45.440,0:19:49.160

when they're engaging with soldiers, they are religiously neutral. So someone who

0:19:49.760,0:19:56.720

doesn't bring in religion and doesn't bring in things that divide us and doesn't automatically

0:19:56.720,0:20:01.280

think of these things in religious terms, but in terms that can connect to everybody

0:20:02.240,0:20:08.880

and not just necessarily express it in terms of a religious context. Now many good chaplains they

0:20:08.880,0:20:14.080

say they leave God out of it. Well I completely agree, fantastic but why necessarily can it be

0:20:14.080,0:20:20.400

only christians that can do it, Yeah and it's important then to have people tha can reflect

0:20:20.400,0:20:26.960

that and be inclusive. (EP): Would it be fair to say there's a sort of attitude that in order to be

0:20:26.960,0:20:33.840

properly moral you have to be a Christian?

(LQ): A

peer of mine and a lieutenant colonel told me that

0:20:34.720,0:20:39.520

it's important that he had Christian soldiers in his unit because otherwise his non-Christian

0:20:39.520,0:20:43.760

soldiers would have nowhere from which to draw their morals and he actually meant it. He wasn't

0:20:43.760,0:20:48.240

even being sarcastic. I was, I was stunned. I don't think that viewpoint is prevalent

0:20:48.240,0:20:54.320

in the army but nevertheless I know people do honestly hold that view. (EP): It seems,

0:20:54.320,0:21:01.040

this seems quite outdated but I think it seems that that's not just within the army but you often

0:21:01.760,0:21:06.320

seem to come across this view in wider society

that religion such as Christianity or another

0:21:06.320,0:21:10.960

religion provides a moral foundation which non-religious people just can't have access

0:21:10.960,0:21:17.520

to. (LQ): Absolutely and that's why in part of

my research was where did morals come from. How

0:21:17.520,0:21:23.360

might one form a moral view. You know if you don't have an absolute authority like a God as the basis

0:21:23.920,0:21:29.840

and that's why I describe myself as Humanist. But interestingly one thing's in my sort of

0:21:29.840,0:21:35.120

professional debate was I'd advocate something called 'O negative Humanism'. You know how O

0:21:35.120,0:21:40.240

negative is the blood group that everybody can have you know, it's a universal donor everyone

0:21:40.240,0:21:44.320

can receive that blood group. The problem with Humanism particularly defined by the British

0:21:44.320,0:21:49.920

Humanist Association is that you've got to reject the supernatural so if we can just park that for

0:21:49.920,0:21:54.400

one moment from all the other stuff I think it's absolutely acceptable by everybody you know.

0:21:55.120,0:22:00.400

They think basing ethical decisions on reason, empathy and concern for humans moral welfare in

0:22:00.400,0:22:06.400

this life being the basis of moral action and advocating that we can give ourselves meaning

0:22:06.400,0:22:11.600

in this life and help others do the same. All those I think are completely acceptable

0:22:11.600,0:22:16.880

regardless of what we do if we can just park the question about whether the supernatural exists.

0:22:16.880,0:22:21.600

I think that'd be the basis for everyone to go ahead and I wrote a charter for secular chaplain's

0:22:21.600,0:22:27.360

based on that because you know I've advocated because I feel that the best way forward: to have

0:22:27.360,0:22:32.720

chaplains absolutely and call them chaplains, but they aren't necessarily religious people in

0:22:32.720,0:22:38.320

those roles. The key thing is they're motivated to help soldiers and military personnel on operations

0:22:38.320,0:22:46.720

at times of distress and lead that part of the military life. (EP):So to provide a sort of moral

0:22:47.360,0:22:54.640

support but without necessarily an invisible means of support. (LQ): Yeah that's right so we just

0:22:54.640,0:22:59.520

leave it to individuals as to whether they believe

you know in God and just pick on the bits that we

0:22:59.520,0:23:05.840
share, the the common parts so that's why you know that's why secularism is important. In fact it was

0:23:05.840,0:23:10.720
actually researching I realised I thought I need this kind of religiously neutral thing and then

0:23:10.720,0:23:16.320
realises actually that's what secularism's about.
(EP): Yeah absolutely well moving on to your

0:23:16.320,0:23:22.720
third point: the language and culture and 'the little things'. What sort of aspects of Christian

0:23:22.720,0:23:27.360
influence do we do you see in the army there?
(LQ): You've only just got to go along and look

0:23:27.360,0:23:31.520
at things like people's cap badges and you'll see Christian crosses embedded in them. You'll see

0:23:31.520,0:23:39.520
unit formation badges so if you're in some brigade somewhere you'd be wearing a Crusader cross.

0:23:40.240,0:23:47.200
So it's embedded all the way through the little language everywhere. And to give another 'little'

0:23:47.760,0:23:53.600
example: ID discs is a good example. You wear them around your body, you have two, one stage of the

0:23:53.600,0:24:01.600
body and one's recovered should you die and on the ID discs you're required to put your name,

0:24:03.280,0:24:10.080
your army number, blood group and your religion.
There's no need in the Geneva Convention

0:24:10.080,0:24:16.000
to give your religious affiliation and in fact it's protected by GDPR and yet we hand this

0:24:16.000,0:24:22.320
information over to any possible character. It's stunning and they insist on having

0:24:22.320,0:24:29.520
original ID discs and I know one Jewish soldier who didn't dare put Jew on his

0:24:30.240,0:24:36.400
ID disc and had it made C of E and I used to keep my RC Roman Catholic ID discs. It's just you know,

0:24:37.440,0:24:42.880
why single out soldiers for possibly worse treatment? But by making them

0:24:42.880,0:24:48.640
declare their religion. Now I understand I've complained about this and understand the army

0:24:49.760,0:24:59.280
will consider making it not compulsory. But the

problem with that is imagine say your patrol's

0:24:59.280,0:25:06.160

taken and you've got C of E, C of E, C of E, blank

you know that does make you stand out so I really

0:25:06.160,0:25:13.040

don't see any reason, good operational reason why

you need to put religion on your ID discs. If a

0:25:13.040,0:25:18.640

soldier is injured or while wounded in operations

we have a fantastically slick system that fires

0:25:18.640,0:25:23.920

a message back all the way back to the UK and we

can instantly know everything about the soldier,

0:25:23.920,0:25:31.920

including what particular religion they are.

And

so long gone are the days when we would mass bury

0:25:31.920,0:25:38.240

our casualties in some foreign field. They come

back and to the UK and I think there's no need,

0:25:38.880,0:25:45.680

no justification to retain religion on the ID discs but it's baked-in there. (EP):

0:25:45.680,0:25:50.720

All these comments that these sort of things, these examples that you've been talking about

0:25:50.720,0:25:57.120

that you've noticed Laurence, sort of suggest

that the army seems, the impression is that

0:25:57.120,0:26:02.720

it seems like an extremely old-fashioned dyed in the wool institution would that be a fair

0:26:03.840,0:26:09.360

impression? (LQ): Tradition's really really important in the army in fact in the services

0:26:13.520,0:26:18.000

it kind of provides that unit glue, that identity that's absolutely essential

0:26:18.000,0:26:23.440

when people are fighting. They're not just fighting for them and their mates around them

0:26:23.440,0:26:27.680

but there's also a kind of sense that they don't

want to let down the battalion that's fought this

0:26:27.680,0:26:33.440

bravely you know for 200 years back-to-back you

know against overwhelming odds. And that does

0:26:33.440,0:26:37.920

that's a source of inspiration and the army quite rightly guards its traditions quite

0:26:37.920,0:26:44.240

jealously but it's shown tremendous flexibility when it comes to things like gender equality and

0:26:45.600,0:26:51.520

breaking down race barriers and it works really really hard to massively improve

0:26:51.520,0:26:58.560

the working environment for all those soldiers and

military personnel but it just seems to have this

0:26:58.560,0:27:05.840

one inclusivity blind spot - that it's so deserved that to have no religion. One senior officer

0:27:06.400,0:27:09.920

presented before with this evidence to say basically "I see no case for change".

0:27:10.960,0:27:16.640

It's just that they I think there's a just inbuilt traditional resistance to change,

0:27:16.640,0:27:20.640

but unfortunately change is needed because the demographics are changing. (EP): Would

0:27:20.640,0:27:27.280

you say that the Christian attitude is more part of the attitude of the older

0:27:27.280,0:27:32.720

generation of officers compared with the younger generation of soldiers? (LQ): That is interesting,

0:27:33.680,0:27:39.360

Yes I did a lot of research as part of this so I sent in Freedom of Information requests

0:27:39.360,0:27:43.600

to the MoD and they sent me lots of data that they held on soldiers' religious affiliation.

0:27:44.240,0:27:49.120

Military personnel are required to enter their personal data on a system called JPA,

0:27:49.840,0:27:53.760

Joint Personal Administration, and it relies on them selecting

0:27:54.640,0:27:59.120

a religious affiliation from a drop-down list.

In other words they're self-selecting how they

0:27:59.120,0:28:02.800

declare themselves and on that list includes things like 'other religion' and 'no religion'

0:28:03.680,0:28:07.840

and if you look at the table 21 data taking all services, not just the army,

0:28:07.840,0:28:15.520

the youngest cohort it's the 18 to 19 year olds, 62% declare they have no religion, 62%.

0:28:16.800,0:28:21.680

But taking the eldest cohort, the 50 plus, that's 93% Christian and remember it's the

0:28:21.680,0:28:27.360

oldest cohort that makes policy decisions on the rest. So it could be I don't know the army,

0:28:27.360,0:28:31.200

I'm not speaking for the army. They need to speak for themselves. But it could be that they just

0:28:31.200,0:28:38.240

don't see it. (P): Mow you've talked a bit about how you yourself tried to raise this issue in the

0:28:38.240,0:28:45.040

army before, how did you go about trying to sort of campaign to bring attention to this idea of

0:28:45.040,0:28:50.560

the need for the army to be more secularised and what was your sort of fundamental aim and how much

0:28:50.560,0:28:55.280

progress did you make? (LQ): What did it for me
was you know looking at the data, research and

0:28:55.280,0:29:00.240

doing a bit of critical thinking and I thought ,
"ah that's all I need to do with everyone else",

0:29:00.960,0:29:07.200

so I write articles for the British Army Review,
that's our professional magazine, very well

0:29:07.200,0:29:14.800

respected and I was honoured really when they
published a couple, three, four of my papers.
And

0:29:14.800,0:29:19.200

that sparked debate and there would be
responses
and counter responses to that and I
countered the

0:29:19.200,0:29:24.000

counter and it's conducted very slowly on the
British Army Review review because it's only

0:29:24.000,0:29:31.760

published about once every six months or so,
perhaps every quarter, so I then got
permission to

0:29:32.560,0:29:38.480

run a blog, a blog site on an intranet for the
military and that's a lot more interactive,

0:29:39.680,0:29:45.200

but a little bit less well-known, a bit
more 'dusty attic'. I called it that dusty

0:29:45.840,0:29:49.520

attic because you need two passwords to get
onto
the site but nevertheless a number of people
would

0:29:50.160,0:29:55.440

join in the discussion there about it and that's
where I got a sense broadly about sort of you
know

0:29:55.440,0:30:00.640

a third would be really keen to advocate
change
and another third would be either way,
others

0:30:00.640,0:30:06.400

probably depending on the lecture change
less so,
but overall the majority I think could support

0:30:07.200,0:30:13.200

change to be more inclusive and I think I've
found certainly talking to younger personnel

0:30:13.200,0:30:18.800

that appetite for change was larger, more
prevalent amongst the younger personnel
than

0:30:18.800,0:30:24.080

older but that's anecdotal. There's no hard
and
fast evidence and data about that. (EP):
Precisely

0:30:24.080,0:30:32.320

because officially no one's looked into it.
(LQ):

Well it is ironic that they refuse to look into it

0:30:33.920,0:30:38.880

or 'waste any public money' as they put it, on
finding out. But yeah so it's difficult then to

0:30:38.880,0:30:45.840

argue the case either way. (EP): So Laurence
for
you why is this change so important now?
(LQ):

0:30:45.840,0:30:51.360

I think it's as important now as it is important when I first pointed it out. Because

0:30:51.360,0:30:59.280

you know inclusivity is essential and the army gets that you need all of your personnel to feel

0:30:59.280,0:31:04.400

an integral part of the unit, not to be outsiders.

They need to bond with the unit, to be important.

0:31:04.400,0:31:12.320

It's important to connect and as we get more and more non-religious the disconnect between our

0:31:12.320,0:31:19.680

soldiers and the traditions of the army is going to grow and we really need to make the change now

0:31:19.680,0:31:25.040

and make the change happily, not be prodded to do it. Make the change that you actually mean it,

0:31:25.040,0:31:29.320

that you want to do it. That's why I think the army's got to shift. (EP):

0:31:30.080,0:31:36.240

Do you think that the problem of secularism in the army is sort of a symptom of a wider

0:31:36.240,0:31:41.760

problem that we have in Britain, that we're still too, we still have too many entrenched traditions

0:31:41.760,0:31:47.040

especially associated with the Church of England as it would which one way forward would just be

0:31:47.040,0:31:52.960

a part of you know a wider secularisation of the country and getting rid of some of these archaic

0:31:52.960,0:31:58.400

traditions which don't really reflect our society.

(LQ): Yeah that's a very good point you know.

0:31:58.400,0:32:04.800

Obviously I've looked at this from my background just to be in terms of the military but yes the

0:32:04.800,0:32:12.400

Bishop's in the House of Lords? Why? What and why? Why just them you know? Why have them at all?

0:32:12.400,0:32:17.360

Why does that particularly qualify them for that role? So that there's a lot of little things:

0:32:17.360,0:32:21.600

they're kind of the wallpaper that's just been left there and we've walked past it for years

0:32:21.600,0:32:26.160

which may well have been appropriate at the time when we were a far more religious country than we

0:32:26.160,0:32:32.480

are now. We're a lot more diverse and yeah I think it probably is the time to just put on, you know,

0:32:32.480,0:32:37.120

get new forever fresh pair of eyes and look again at the things that we do take for granted.

0:32:37.760,0:32:41.440

Really really is that the best way to do it? Is that the most inclusive way to do it?

0:32:41.440,0:32:47.360

We need to be open to change, to improve things and not just kind of roll back and hope to roll

0:32:47.360,0:32:51.680

back the years. Change managed well is a good thing and not to be scared of it. (EP): And

0:32:51.680,0:32:57.440

just just one final question: the old adage 'there are no atheists in a foxhole'. Does that

0:32:58.240,0:33:04.960

have have any force at all that that saying? (LQ): Yes well so some people have said that to me. I

0:33:04.960,0:33:10.400

was quite surprised. I get it; I can understand when a senior person said that to me. What the

0:33:10.400,0:33:15.920

point was trying to make you know was that under stress people you know turn to religion. And you

0:33:15.920,0:33:20.720

know, I prayed so I completely understand why I said it. At the same time it's kind of like

0:33:21.360,0:33:26.880

it's a little bit tone deaf to understand what

that implies and the atheists have the moral fibre

0:33:26.880,0:33:32.640

to hold true to their beliefs when operations and yet he couldn't quite see it that way

0:33:32.640,0:33:38.400

you quite see that interpretation so yeah I think it's kind of the language of the culture

0:33:38.400,0:33:51.840

and 'the little things' that need to change. (EP): Laurence Quinn, thank you very much.

0:33:54.640,0:33:59.840

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