

Declaration for a Secular Public Service

December 2nd 2015

This declaration is official policy of AFT. We appeal to all associations in Canada which support secularism to sign, with the goal of building a pan-Canadian coalition for a secular public service.

We, the undersigned, hereby affirm our support for secularism in the public service of the Canadian federal government and in the public services of all provincial and territorial governments. In particular, we affirm that secularism requires that both the physical structures which house these services and the employees who staff them be religiously neutral and free of religious influence and symbolism. To achieve this, both structures and employees must refrain from displaying any obvious sectarian religious symbols of any kind. By “sectarian” we mean symbols which imply belonging to or adhering to a particular religious community or to the beliefs of a particular religion. Thus, each and every public servant, while on duty, must refrain from any behaviour and from the wearing of any clothing or accessories or ornaments which would clearly identify that individual with a particular religion or religious community. We call this the employee’s **obligation of religious restraint**.

This obligation of religious restraint would apply only to employees while on duty and not to ordinary members of the public who are the users of public services, nor would it apply to off-duty employees.

This measure is required in order to protect the freedom of conscience of all persons, including both employees of public services and members of the public who are users of such services. Freedom of conscience includes both freedom of religion and freedom **from** religion and thus involves both the right of religious adherents to practise their religion and the right of non-believers to receive public services from state employees who do not, either by their behaviour or attire, promote religious practices or beliefs, as if such practices or beliefs were endorsed by the state.

The obligation of religious restraint constitutes a reasonable limitation on the freedom of expression of employees while on duty, but it in no way threatens their freedom of religion because it applies only while they are working as public servants. Many employment positions involve certain constraints on dress or behaviour. It is reasonable that a federal, provincial or territorial government, whose duty is to all citizens regardless of their religion, should impose religious neutrality and restraint on their employees in the interest of fairness to the citizens they serve.

There are some who adopt a very limited definition of the term “religious neutrality” involving only behaviour, excluding the clothing or symbols worn. We reject this view because we consider it inadequate and not truly neutral. It is essential that any obvious religious symbols or clothing also be prohibited while employees are on duty because these symbols and clothing transmit a message which would compromise the wearer’s neutrality. For example, some religions, at least in some of their variants, promote gender inequality, homophobia, denial of freedom of conscience or worse. Indeed, religions themselves are generally the most notorious perpetrators of religious persecution, sometimes involving even the criminalization of apostasy. For this and similar reasons, a symbol of a religion whose tenets may be incompatible with fundamental human rights, if worn by an on-duty representative of the state, constitutes a violation of religious neutrality and is tantamount to discrimination against not only atheists and other non-believers, but also against adherents of other religions and even against members of the same religion who may not agree with such tenets.

Another reason for urgency in asserting this obligation of religious restraint is the necessity of dispelling the current toxic atmosphere around the issue of secularism, a toxicity which was promoted and continues to be promoted by opponents of secular legislation proposed by the previous government of Quebec. Indeed, the Charter of Secularism (or, formally, Charter affirming the values of State secularism and

religious neutrality and of equality between women and men, and providing a framework for accommodation requests) proposed by the Quebec government in November 2013 (and which died when that government was defeated in April 2014) was met with an extremely hostile and dishonest reaction, especially from outside Quebec. This hostility was based mainly on two issues: (1) the party proposing the Charter promotes Quebec sovereignty and (2) the Charter challenged dubious assumptions about religious freedom which are based on so-called “multiculturalism.”

In reality, the Charter contained several provisions which extended the secularization of Quebec society and were largely ignored by opponents. Only the dress code provision – based on the principle of an obligation of religious restraint for public servants while on duty – was seriously controversial as a consequence of the two objections mentioned above. We reject both. Objection (1) is irrational because a good idea remains a good idea regardless of its source. Objection (2) is untenable because it is equivalent to cultural relativism, the false and dangerous ideology which holds that all cultural values are of equal merit.

Furthermore, Quebec law already imposes an obligation of political restraint on public servants. The obligation of religious restraint proposed both by the Charter and by this declaration is an obvious and reasonable extension of that duty. Those who would oppose a rule imposing political neutrality would have to accept public servants wearing any political symbol while on the job, including symbols of totalitarian ideologies.

Those who would accept a ban on political symbols but reject a ban on religious ones would have to provide a practical and workable definition of religion, religious beliefs and religious symbols, in order to explain how religious beliefs can be distinguished from political opinions, and religious symbols from political ones. (For example, if a person believes, for religious reasons, that abortion or homosexuality should be criminalized, or that women who do not wear the Islamist veil are not “pure,” how is that not a political opinion?) Even if one could successfully make such a distinction, how could one justify granting a privilege to religious beliefs, above and beyond what is allowed for political opinions? And given a clear demarcation between religion and politics, how can one justify banning political symbols but not religious symbols worn by public servants while on duty?

Freedom of religion means the freedom to practise the religion of one’s choice in private life or with one’s coreligionists. It does **not** give believers *carte blanche* to advertise their religious affiliation while at work in the public service.

Atheist Freethinkers – Libres penseurs athées

For the current list of signatories, please consult:

<http://www.atheology.ca/special/declaration-secular-public-service/>