

Atheists want probe of religion in military

November 13, 2008

WASHINGTON (RNS)—A national atheist lobbying group is calling on President-elect Barack Obama to overhaul military policies in an effort to reduce what it sees as religious discrimination in the armed forces.

The [Secular Coalition for America](#) has written a letter asking Obama to scrutinize new appointees to ensure fairness to atheist soldiers, to survey the military on current religious conditions and to establish a commission on “religious accommodation” within the Defense Department.

“We wrote these recommendations before we knew the outcome of the election,” said Lori Lipman Brown, director of the coalition. “The truth is we had no better expectations of one candidate over the other when it came to this particular issue.”

The group also asked for chaplain-training curriculum that addresses free exercise of religion. One-fifth of military personnel identify themselves as atheists or having no religion.

“For the past three years, we have seen the problems of harassment, coercive proselytizing, efforts to convert and discrimination against those holding certain beliefs go unresolved,” Brown said.

The military operates under Department of Defense Directive 1300.17, which allows members to observe their respective religions. In addition, Directive 1350.2 states that “persons shall be evaluated on individual merit, fitness and capability, regardless of ... religion.”

“Our president-elect has been alternatively labeled as an atheist and a

Muslim," said Jason Torpy, president of the [Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers](#) . "The truth is he's a Christian, and in many ways, he's worn religion on his sleeve. ... As we hope for change, we want to make sure that he understands our position as well."