

House rejects call to allow nonreligious military chaplains

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(RNS) House lawmakers late Tuesday (July 23) approved an amendment to a Pentagon spending bill to prevent the appointment of nonreligious military chaplains.

The amendment, sponsored by Rep. John C. Fleming, R-La., requires that only religious organizations be permitted to endorse chaplains for the military.

“The amendment holds the military to its current standards on endorsing agencies, which must be recognized religious and faith-based organizations,” said Fleming’s spokesman, Doug Sachtleben.

Currently, the Department of Defense recognizes more than 200 endorsing agents, all of them based on a belief in God. But there has been a recent push by Humanists, who do not recognize a supernatural divinity, to endorse their own military chaplains.

It is unclear if the amendment will affect the application of Jason Heap to become the Navy’s first Humanist chaplain. Heap, a 38-year-old graduate of Brite Divinity School and Oxford University, has the endorsement of the Humanist Society. His supporters are asking the Navy to add the society to its list of endorsers and appoint Heap a chaplain.

Jason Torpy, president of the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers, points out that military regulations already require that chaplains be endorsed — and not necessarily by an organization of believers in a divinity.

“The language (of the amendment) only requires adherence to the applicable instruction, which in no way restricts chaplains to only those who believe in some higher power,” he said. “Their amendment does nothing, so there’s nothing to be done in response. It just shows their ignorance about atheists, humanists, and military regulations.”

The amendment has the support of the Chaplain Alliance for Religious Liberty, an organization of Christian chaplains. In a statement issued Tuesday, Chaplain Ron Crews, a retired Air Force Colonel, said, “A fringe minority is advocating for atheists to be commissioned as chaplains, but the very nature of the word ‘chaplain’ suggests that the individual possesses a belief in God and a desire to minister to spiritual needs.”

The amendment, which was attached to the Department of Defense 2014 Appropriations bill, was passed with a vote of 253 to 173. The larger bill is slated for a full House vote on Wednesday, Sachtleben said. It has not yet been considered by the Senate.