

Canadian Supreme Court rules against opening meetings with prayer

by [Ron Csillag](#) in the [May 13, 2015](#) issue

Canada's Supreme Court has ruled that a small town in Quebec may not open its council meetings with prayer.

In a unanimous ruling April 15, Canada's highest court ruled that the city of Saguenay can no longer publicly recite a Catholic prayer because it infringes on freedom of conscience and religion.

The case dates back to 2007, when a resident of Saguenay complained about public prayer at city hall.

Last year, a divided U.S. Supreme Court ruled that legislative bodies such as city councils could begin their meetings with prayer, even if it plainly favors a specific religion.

But the Canadian high court ruled that the country's social mores have "given rise to a concept of neutrality according to which the state must not interfere in religion and beliefs. The state must instead remain neutral in this regard. This neutrality requires that the state neither favor nor hinder any particular belief, and the same holds true for nonbelief."

The court said a nondenominational prayer is still religious in nature and would exclude nonbelievers.

In 2011, a human rights tribunal in Quebec ordered an end to the prayers and awarded \$30,000 in damages to the complainant.

Quebec's Court of Appeals overturned that decision two years later, saying the town imposed no religious views on its citizens.

But the high court ruled that it is the state's "duty to protect every person's freedom of conscience and religion." That means it "may not use its powers in such a way as to promote the participation of certain believers or nonbelievers in public life to the detriment of others."

The court awarded the complainant \$33,500 in damages.

Only hours after the ruling was made public, the city of Ottawa suspended its practice of beginning council meetings with a prayer, saying it needs to review the decision. Other municipalities have also halted the practice, pending a review.

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