

## **Title: Developing the spiritual fitness program for the Belgian Defence?**

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### **Summary**

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The US Army (Department of Defense, DoD) has developed a Total Force Fitness (TFF) model to conceptualize, assess and optimize the health and human performance of the Armed Forces (CJCSI 3405.01, 2011; Jonas et al., 2010). This holistic and integrative model of health consists of eight domains that encompass the fitness of the whole person, namely mind, body and spirit (Worthington & Deuster, 2018), through the whole deployment cycle. In the visual model of TFF, the spiritual fitness is included in the 'ideological and spiritual' section, containing elements of definition such as 'sense of identity and belonging', 'awareness of meaning and purpose', 'embracing service core values' and 'ability to cope'. The TFF framework also overlaps with the HPO (Human Performance Optimization), a framework which conceptualizes warfighters as high performance athletes whose performance is optimized through integrative care (Deuster & O'Connor, 2017). Despite its inclusion in TFF as a separate field, its consideration as an essential component of HPO's integrated health, and the recognition of its contribution to preventative health (Ellison et al., 2001; Gonçalves et al., 2015; Koenig, 2015; Koenig et al., 2001; Pargament & Sweeney, 2011; Pargament et al., 2001; Puchalski, 2007; Worthington & Deuster, 2018), spiritual fitness as a concept suffers from a lack of attention from a research perspective, also on NATO-level. However, several aspects of spiritual fitness are already being researched, including the development of a spiritual fitness program that allows the use of assessment tools such as the GAT (Global Assessment Tool), in order to measure the level of spirituality in a 'two-way' model (Alexander et al., 2020), taking into account both 'horizontal' and 'vertical' spiritualities. Thanks to this bi-directional consideration for both religious and non-religious views, the spiritual fitness of each member of army forces could be assessed. From the point of view of the TFF and HPO models, the Belgian Defence is not left behind. Since around 2013, the Belgian Defence Health and Well-being Directorate General has developed its own Total Force Fitness paradigm, which is now being conceptualized in the so-called 'Integrated Fitness model'. 'Spiritual fitness' is a one of components of this model and the chaplains are among the main stakeholders. This component has been included in the MIND domain under the name of 'conviction' (Values, Beliefs and Sense-making) within the new vision of Directorate of Health and Well-being, and in the Policy Handbook of the Belgian Defence. For the moment, the US army remains a pioneer in the development of spiritual fitness and its applications are important to transpose into the Belgian societal and military reality. Notion of 'spiritual wellness', developed in particular by the Canadian Armed Forces, as part of the Defence Team Total Health and Wellness Strategic Framework, is also essential to take into consideration.

For Belgium, there is a real need for an in-depth, interdisciplinary, multidimensional and large-scale research will allow focusing on the definition of criteria to identify the spiritual needs for the Belgian Defence, developing a broader concept of spiritual-existential care and to select then the relevant assessment tools for a potential "spiritual fitness" program. Therefore, a

doctoral research on the reform of the Belgian military chaplaincies and their possible contribution to the spiritual fitness program is ongoing.