

# Commencement prayers as a measure of inclusivity and representativeness in Oceanian parliaments

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## Introduction

Parliaments are undeniably creatures of tradition, often proud of the customs inherited as descendants of particular parliamentary pedigrees. As products of their time, these inherited practices date easily and require regular assessment and measured adjustments to preserve their functionality and relevance. The factors comprising this relevance have evolved over the past 75 years as the significance and role of political representation has, which has seen inclusivity and representativeness become important dynamics of the relevance of parliamentary customs. Chief among practices commonly scrutinised for relevance are the prayers delivered at the commencement of sitting days. This feature has remained largely unchanged since its introduction to Westminster in 1558 and remains one which parliamentarians have historically been reluctant to modify.<sup>1</sup> However, the rise of disruptive sectarian incidents worldwide – such as the 2019 Christchurch terror attacks – provide cause for introspection and reassessment of the relevance of prayers and other parliamentary customs.

This paper explores whether current commencement prayers used in Oceania's national and sub-national legislatures clear benchmarks for representation and inclusivity. It finds that commencement prayers in all-but-two of these parliaments warrant modification, failing to meet either one or both benchmarks in a regional climate of increasing exclusionary socio-political activity. After first addressing some limitations and assumptions raised by this paper, the two benchmarks will be laid out and justified. The following section details the assessment of individual legislatures' practices against these benchmarks. After this, the paper considers the importance recent socio-political activity in the region have on the necessity to modify prayers currently used and concludes with a brief overview of three alternative models from the region worth consideration.

## Limitations and assumptions

This paper relies primarily on census data when assessing for representativeness and, before progressing, it is important to acknowledge two core limitations of this data. First, the collection of religious affiliation in censuses is an inherently flawed process which affects its usefulness. Unlike other demographic data collected which has clear, qualifiable responses – i.e. sex, gender, ethnicity – religious affiliation requires respondents to self-identify their religion without any qualification (attendance, adherence, initiation, etc.) Responses can also vary census-to-census based on respondents' self-identification without any qualitative change in their religiosity. Similarly, irreligious respondents may opt not to answer the question at all or identify with parody religions.<sup>2</sup> Due to the lack of qualification and level of self-identification, religious affiliation statistics are not infallible and serve best as an indicator of identity rather than religiosity.

The second of these limitations is that census data for many of the Pacific Islands is inconsistent. A variety of factors contribute to this reality – historical irregularity of censuses,

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<sup>1</sup> Parliament of the United Kingdom. "Prayers." UK Parliament. Accessed August 11, 2019.

<https://www.parliament.uk/about/how/business/prayers/>.

<sup>2</sup> Statistics New Zealand. "Religious Affiliation: Definition." Stats NZ. 2016. Accessed August 7, 2019.

<http://archive.stats.govt.nz/methods/classifications-and-standards/classification-related-stats-standards/religious-affiliation/output.aspx>.

disruptive political and natural events, lack of digitization, changes in religious classification, etc. – which can leave significant data gaps. This makes trend-tracking difficult. Where jurisdictions have significant data gaps, this paper substitutes in statistics from the Association of Religious Data Archives, one of the most reliable open-source archives of global religious data. While undesirable, this substitution is used sparingly and helps fill in gaps with data which is assumed to be as close-to-accurate as possible.

The paper also sets out to assess national and sub-national legislatures (i.e. state and province parliaments within federal systems) within Oceania, a data set of around 63 jurisdictions, some with dual houses. The sample for this paper focuses solely on national-level and Australian state-level legislatures, creating a manageable sample size of 23. Other jurisdictions were selected to be excluded based on a to lack of available information or census data. Notable is the absence of only one national-level parliament from this sample: The Congress of Palau. This exclusion was made after a serious search failed to yield a copy of the Congress' rules of procedures or any information on its commencement practices.

One assumption in this paper also requires brief recognition; Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses are included within this paper's working classification of Christianity. Though theological debate about their status as Christian denominations continues – debate which influences their census classification in many Pacific Island states – they have been included in the Christian total used within this paper. Inclusion is not a judgment on the debate, but ensures standardisation across all countries, especially those with substantive populations of these denominations (i.e. 19% of Tongans identify as Mormon<sup>3</sup>).

## Method and intention behind the inclusivity and representation benchmarks

This paper uses two benchmarks to assess the representativeness and inclusivity of each legislature's commencement prayers.

- For the **representation** benchmark, if over half of a jurisdiction's population affiliates with the same religion as that of the prayer of the corresponding parliament, the prayer can be considered representative.
  - ↳ If the majority threshold isn't met, the prayer cannot be considered representative.
  - ↳ Parliaments with silent prayer/reflection or multi-faith or secular prayers are considered representative without further qualification.

This benchmark's method is designed to assess prayers' representativeness against the lowest common denominator, a simple majority within a population's religious affiliations. This method does not make value judgements on any given prayer's level of representativeness. It simply identifies whether or not it is representative of the majority of a jurisdiction's population – the same level of representativeness required when forming a government.

- For the **inclusivity** benchmark, if a parliament either: (a) holds a silent or multi-faith prayer/reflection, (b) uses expressly secular language, (c) holds prayers prior to and separate from commencement practices, or (d) acknowledges adherents of other/minority faiths, its practice can be considered inclusive.
  - ↳ If a parliament's practice does not feature any one of these conditions, it cannot be considered inclusive.

The inclusivity benchmark focusses on identifying features of a parliament's prayers which qualify it as inclusive. The features used are specific and have been identified as practices proposed or used to increase the inclusivity of prayers. It is worth acknowledging that though

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<sup>3</sup> 2016 Census of Population and Housing: Basic Tables and Administrative Report. Vol. 1. Nuku'alofa, Tonga: Tongan Department of Statistics, 2016, pg. 13

attempting to be as broad as possible, the features included are not exhaustive and as such the benchmark may require revision as new alternatives are developed.

Parliaments which do not include prayer in their commencement practices are exempt from benchmarking, as it is impractical to assess the absence of something for qualities it could only possess were it present. This is not an issue here, as all jurisdictions assessed in this paper feature commencement prayers. However, the benchmarks as a whole have been designed to be able to be applied when applied to the practices of any parliament in the world at any point, so their covering all possibilities is key to that functionality.

## Assessment of Oceanian parliaments' commencement prayers

This section catalogues the assessment of Oceania's national and sub-national parliaments against the representation and inclusivity benchmarks. For this, parliaments are split into jurisdictional sub-regions – Australia-New Zealand, Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. In its assessment, a regional dichotomy is identified:

1. Commencement prayers have remained representative in the Christian-dominated Pacific Islands, but fail to be inclusive of their small, established religious minorities.
2. Most prayers in New Zealand and Australian parliaments are neither inclusive nor representative as their populations become decreasingly Christian and increasingly irreligious and pluralistic.

### Australia and New Zealand

This sub-region comprises the parliaments of Australia, the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, the Northern Territory, New Zealand, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria, and Western Australia.

#### Representation benchmark

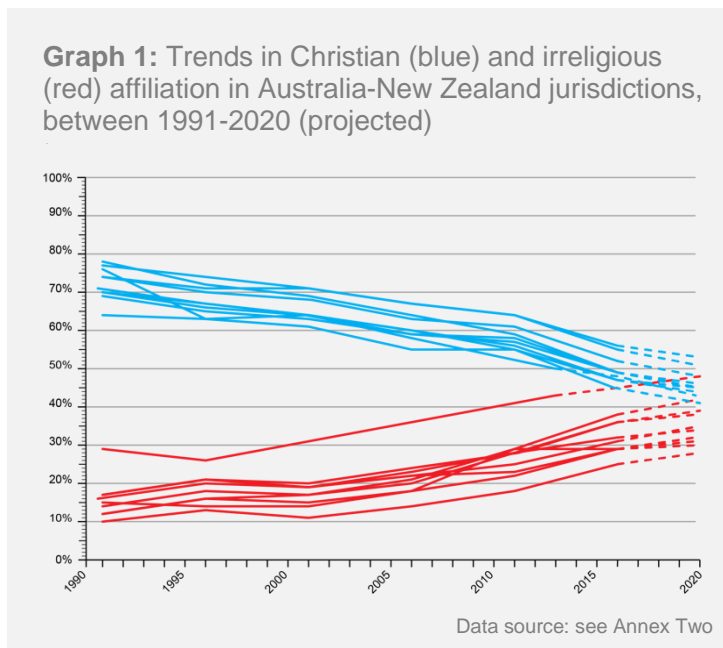
**Table 1:** Australia-New Zealand subregion representation assessment

Jurisdiction	House	Read	Silent	Religion	% pop.	Year	Rep
<b>Australia</b>	Upper	✓		Christian	48.8	2020	✗
	Lower	✓		Christian			
<b>- ACT</b>	Unicameral		✓	nil	-	-	✓
<b>- NSW</b>	Upper	✓		Christian	51.8	2020	✓
	Lower	✓		Christian			
<b>- NT</b>	Unicameral	✓		Christian	45.2	2020	✗
<b>- QLD</b>	Unicameral	✓		Christian	53.5	2020	✓
<b>- SA</b>	Upper	✓		Christian	46.1	2020	✗
	Lower	✓		Christian			
<b>- TAS</b>	Upper	✓		Christian	45.4	2020	✗
	Lower	✓		Christian			
<b>- VIC</b>	Upper	✓		Christian	44.4	2020	✗
	Lower	✓		Christian			
<b>- WA</b>	Upper	✓		Christian	46.9	2020	✗
	Lower	✓		Christian			
<b>New Zealand</b>	Unicameral	✓		Monotheistic	47.4	2013	✗

Data source: see annexes one and two

Six of the sub-region's ten parliaments' prayers (11/16 legislative houses) fail to meet the representation benchmark. Eight parliaments use Christian prayer in their commencement practices (seven of these include the Lord's Prayer), yet only two of these jurisdictions – Queensland and New South Wales – are projected to still have Christian majorities by 2020. The region has two outliers. The Australian Capital Territory Legislative Assembly is the first, observing a period of silent reflection or prayer before sittings since June 1995.<sup>4</sup> Second is the New Zealand Parliament, which includes reference to a monotheistic 'almighty God', but omits any specifying traits to align this god to one religion.<sup>5</sup> Regardless of this relatively recent change, this expanded monotheist category still falls short of the 50% mark.

The majority of parliamentary prayers fail to meet this representation benchmark due to the sustained, accelerating decrease of Christian affiliation in the subregion over the past few decades. The majority of jurisdictions no longer had Christian majorities as of 2016, with trend projections drawn from census data since 1991 predicting Australia's national Christian population dropped below 50% during 2019. Simultaneous to this decrease has been the slow but consistent increase in irreligious affiliation and religious pluralism. Trend projections from the same data estimates the first majority irreligious jurisdictions could appear in the mid-to-late 2020s.



### Inclusivity benchmark

All but one of the region's parliaments (15/16 legislative houses) fail to conclusively meet the inclusion benchmark. The Australian Capital Territory again is the sub-region's outlier, with its silent prayer/reflection falling under the first of the benchmark's four potential features of an inclusive opening. The invitation for silent prayer or reflection included in the opening of the Tasmanian House of Assembly does not fall under this same category as the Speaker immediately after the invitation reads-aloud the Lord's Prayer,<sup>6</sup> undermining the inclusivity which silence affords. The New Zealand Parliament prayer also fails to clear this benchmark, although its reference to 'Almighty God' may be monotheistic at best, the prayer remains distinctly Judeo-Christian. All other parliament's prayers fail to meet any of this benchmark's potential inclusion features.

### Melanesia

This sub-region comprises the parliaments of Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Fiji, and the Solomon Islands.

<sup>4</sup> McRae, Mark, Tom Duncan, and Derek Abbot, eds. *Companion to the Standing Orders of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory*. Canberra: Office of the Legislative Assembly, 2009, pp. 94, 114.

<sup>5</sup> Patterson, Jane. "Jesus, Queen Dropped from Parliament Prayer." *Radio New Zealand*, November 9, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> HA (Tas) SO No 22.

## Representation benchmark

**Table 2:** Melanesian subregion representation assessment

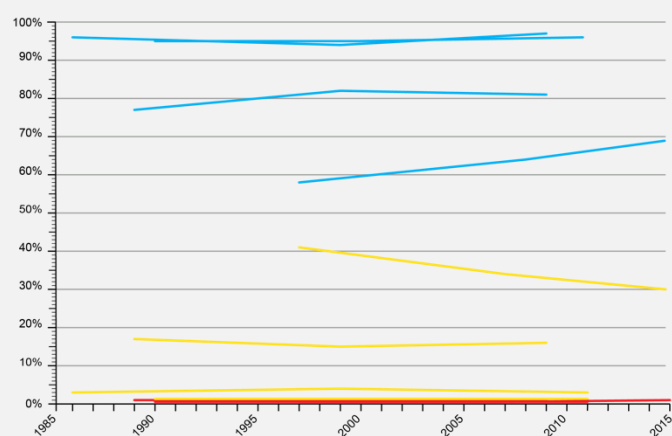
Jurisdiction	House	Read	Silent	Religion	% pop.	Year	Rep
<b>Fiji</b>	Unicameral	✓		Christian	69.1	2016	✓
<b>Papua New Guinea</b>	Unicameral	✓		Christian	96.0	2011	✓
<b>Solomon Islands</b>	Unicameral	✓		Christian	96.8	2009	✓
<b>Vanuatu</b>	Unicameral	✓		Christian	81.5	2009	✓

Data source: see annexes one and two

Every parliament (four legislative houses) in this sub-region meets the representation benchmark, as the Christianity of these legislatures' prayers is shared by the vast majority of their jurisdictions' populations. All jurisdictions mandate commencement prayers in their standing orders,<sup>7</sup> however only Papua New Guinea and Fiji prescribed the text of said prayers, the legislatures of the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu invite different members each sitting day to lead their members in prayer.

Most jurisdictions' levels of Christian affiliation have remained high and relatively stable since census records began. The exception to this is Fiji, which has experienced a sustained increase in the percentage of its population identifying as Christian since 1989 due to mass emigration of primarily Hindu-identifying Fijian Indians following the coups d'état.<sup>8</sup> Aside from the declining 'other' affiliation in Fiji, the three other jurisdictions also have small, sustained religious minorities. Irreligious affiliation for all jurisdictions sits a 2% or less with no sign of growth. These trends match those in the Micronesian and Polynesian subregions.

**Graph 2:** Trends in Christian (blue), irreligious (red), and other (yellow) affiliation in the Melanesian sub-region, between 1986-2015



Data source: see Annex Two

## Inclusivity benchmark

No commencement prayer in any of the four Melanesian parliaments clear the inclusivity benchmark. This is not uncommon; existing literature indicates that states with minorities (e.g. religious, ethnic) which do not assimilate culturally can exhibit socially exclusive behaviours, especially in the political sphere.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See: *Standing Orders of the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji*, SO No 30.1; *Papua New Guinea Standing Orders of the National Parliament*, SO No 34; *Standing Orders of the National Parliament of the Solomon Islands* SO No 31.1(a), and; *Standing Orders of the Parliament of Vanuatu*, SO No 17.2(a)

<sup>8</sup> Wyeth, Grant. "Indo-Fijians and Fiji's Coup Culture." *The Diplomat*, March 28, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> See: Babachan, H. "Challenges of Inclusion: Cultural Diversity, Citizenship and Engagement." 1-18. Proceedings of the International Conference on Engaging Communities, Brisbane, QLD, Australia. 14-17 August 2005.

## Micronesia

This sub-region comprises the parliaments of the Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, and Palau.

### Representation benchmark

**Table 3:** Micronesian subregion representation assessment

Jurisdiction	House	Read	Silent	Religion	% pop.	Year	Rep
<b>Micronesia</b>	Unicameral		✓	nil	-	-	✓
<b>Kiribati</b>	Unicameral	✓		Christian	97.0	2015	✓
<b>Marshall Islands</b>	Unicameral	opt.	✓	nil	-	-	✓
<b>Nauru</b>	Unicameral	✓		Christian	96.1	2011	✓

Data source: see annexes one and two

As with the Melanesian sub-group before it, every parliament (six legislative houses) in the Micronesian sub-region meets the representation benchmark. This is, as before, due to incredibly high and stable Christian affiliated populations within the jurisdictions. Trends also indicated the presence of stable 'other' minorities, primarily comprised of Baha'i and Buddhists – the latter a result of migration which occurred while the subregion was a part of the Japanese Empire's South Pacific Mandate.<sup>10</sup>

### Inclusivity benchmark

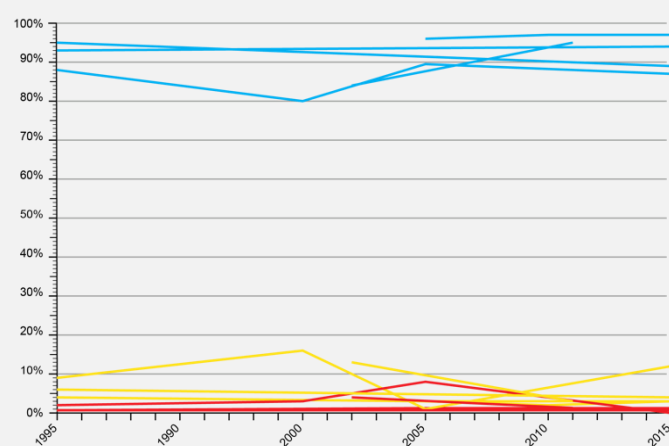
Unique among the three Pacific Island sub-regions, two parliaments (2/6 legislative houses) in Micronesia meet the inclusivity benchmark. In Micronesia proper, sitting days commence with silent prayer.<sup>11</sup> Due to the absence of

read-aloud religious prayer, this method secularises the practice and meets the first feature of the benchmark. The same practice is observed in the Marshall Islands,<sup>12</sup> with provision in the rules of procedure for the Speaker to designate, if they so wish, a chaplain to lead prayers as in the Washington parliamentary tradition.<sup>13</sup> The remaining two parliaments do not meet the inclusivity benchmark.

## Polynesia

This sub-region comprises the parliaments of the Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa, the Kingdom of Tonga, and Tuvalu. The Cook Islands and Niue have been included as they are sovereign states

**Graph 3:** Trends in Christian (blue), irreligious (red), and other (yellow) affiliation in the Micronesian sub-region, between 1995-2015



Data source: see Annex Two

<sup>10</sup> Peattie, Mark. *Nan'yō: The Rise and Fall of the Japanese in Micronesia, 1885–1945*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1992.

<sup>11</sup> *Rules of Procedure of the Congress of the Federated States of Micronesia*, §5.1(a)

<sup>12</sup> *Rules of Procedure of the Nitijela*, §8.2(a), and §52

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, §8.2(i)

in their own right, notwithstanding the foreign affairs and defence provisos of their association with New Zealand.

### Representation benchmark

**Table 4:** Polynesian subregion representation assessment

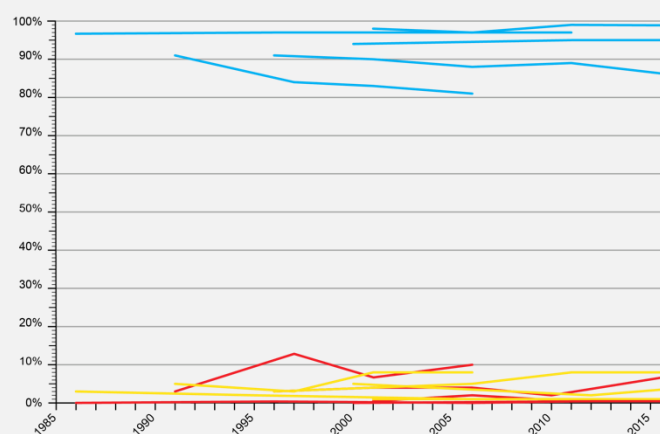
Jurisdiction	House	Read	Silent	Religion	% pop.	Year	Rep
<b>Cook Islands</b>	Unicameral	✓		Christian	84.5	2016	✓
<b>Niue</b>	Unicameral	✓		Christian	81.4	2006	✓
<b>Samoa</b>	Unicameral	✓		Christian	99.3	2016	✓
<b>Tonga</b>	Unicameral	✓		Christian	97.6	2011	✓
<b>Tuvalu</b>	Unicameral	✓		Christian	95.7	2017	✓

Data source: see annexes one and two

All parliaments (five legislative houses) in the Polynesian sub-region meet the representation benchmark, as with all other Pacific Island parliaments. This is once again the result of incredibly high rates of Christianity in the region, which nears homogeneity in Samoa. In the Cook Islands, prayers at the conclusion of a sitting day are also mandated under standing orders.<sup>14</sup> Of note is the significant interweaving of parliamentary tradition with religion in Tuvalu, where the Lord's Prayer is read at the start of each sitting day, sittings must adjourn for evening devotions, and clerics from the Church of Tuvalu open legislative sessions in prayer and deliver a sermon.<sup>15</sup>

It is worth drawing attention to the slow, gradual decline of Christian affiliation in Niue and the Cook Islands. Unlike the decline in Australia and New Zealand, the decline observed in these two jurisdictions appears to be the result of sustained depopulation.<sup>16</sup>

**Graph 4:** Trends in Christian (blue), irreligious (red), and other (yellow) affiliation in the Polynesia sub-region, between 1986-2015



Data source: see Annex Two

### Inclusivity benchmark

All Polynesian parliaments fail to meet the inclusivity benchmark, for most of the reasons earlier addressed in the Melanesian sub-region.

### Socio-political trends in Oceania and representation

Before moving to consideration of alternative models, it is worth framing the necessity for alternatives by discussing two recent socio-political trends emerging across the region: the decline of Christian affiliation in Australia and New Zealand, and the risk of religious majoritarianism in the Pacific Islands

<sup>14</sup> *Standing Orders of the Parliament of the Cook Islands*, SO No 64(q)

<sup>15</sup> *Parliament of Tuvalu Rules of Procedure*, §19

<sup>16</sup> See: "Gloomy Outlook for Population Decline." *Cook Islands News*, July 4, 2014, and; Associated Press. "Niue, the Pacific Island Struggling to Cope as Its Population Plummets." *The Guardian*, July 13, 2014.

## Decline of Christian affiliation in Australia and New Zealand

The first trend necessitating this consideration is the substantive shift in religious affiliation in Australia and New Zealand, with the decline of Christian affiliation and the sustained, correlated rise of irreligion. This trend matches those seen in other developed, historically Christian Western states. The rise of religious pluralisation and shifts towards liberalism over paternalism have undermined religious authority in these countries, particularly affecting paternalistically-structured Christianity.<sup>17</sup> As a result, Christian adherents are consistently turning away from religion, reducing Christianity's share of the population. This does not appear to be a temporary shift either. Irreligion exhibits a permanence which modern religious affiliation struggles to match. Research from the United Kingdom indicates that while just 55% of children of religious parents remain religious, 95% children of irreligious parents remain irreligious.<sup>18</sup> Australia and New Zealand are the only countries in Oceania which exhibit this trend, a phenomenon which is a by-product of the migratory rather than missionary focus on these jurisdictions' during their administration as British colonies. In most Pacific Islands, Christianity remains steadfast due to its involuntary replacement of traditional belief systems during the 19th Century.<sup>19</sup>

As this shift is not a visible one and therefore lacks any visual cues, it becomes important that legislatures take time to routinely consider their practices for representation and inclusivity. It is just as important when doing so to balance fact and opinion, especially as religion often exercises disproportionate influence over public political discourse when a proposal diverges from its preferred pre-existing established social order.<sup>20</sup> One example of this are the protests against the 2017 removal of references to Jesus Christ from the New Zealand Parliament's commencement prayer, which still proves a persistent political issue almost two years after the initial change.<sup>21</sup> It is also important to reflect on representation and inclusivity as religious influence can also be used to exclude, as is now being realised in the Pacific Islands.

## Christian homogeneity and majoritarianism in the Pacific

The second trend which underpins the need to consider alternatives is emergence of majoritarianism and intolerance in the wake of of Christian homogeneity in the Pacific Islands. As highlighted previously, all Pacific Island states have substantive Christian majorities, 11 of which (including the Marshall Islands and Federated States of Micronesia) register at over 90% of the population. Highly homogenous societies, such as these, become ripe grounds for the growth of political intolerance. Research has observed the perceived threat to an individual's group – such as a religious denomination – by an 'other' is the most potent catalyst of intolerance.<sup>22</sup> Out of this can develop majoritarianism, where the primacy of a majority within society is expected and exercised, often to the detriment of minorities. While this paper doesn't suggest that altering parliamentary traditions will affect jurisdictions developing majoritarian tendencies, it is prudent to be mindful that practices do not contribute to or legitimise its emergence.

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<sup>17</sup> Woodhead, Linda. "The Rise of 'no Religion' in Britain: The Emergence of a New Cultural Majority." *Journal of the British Academy*, 2016, pg. 255-57.

<sup>18</sup> Woodhead, pg. 249.

<sup>19</sup> See: Yengoyan, Aram A. "Christianity and Austronesian Transformations: Church, Polity and Culture in the Philippines and the Pacific." In *The Austronesians: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, 351-62. Canberra: ANU Press, 1995.

<sup>20</sup> Smith, Donald. "Limits of Religious Resurgence." In *Religious Resurgence and Politics in the Contemporary World*, edited by Emile Sahliyeh. Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1990, pg. 44.

<sup>21</sup> See: McCann, Mitch. "Hundreds Rally at Parliament to Keep Jesus in Opening Prayer." *Newshub*, January 30, 2018; Fitzgerald, Katie. "Christians Return to Parliament to Protest Removal of Jesus from Prayer." *Newshub*, October 30, 2018; Tamaki, Brian. Destiny Church. "Our Nations Identity Crisis." News release, April 4, 2019. Scoop Politics. Accessed August 18, 2019. <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/PO1904/S00063/our-nations-identity-crisis.htm>, and; Blundy, Rachel, and Thomas Lowe. "No, New Zealand did not Remove References to Jesus from its Parliamentary Prayer in Response to the Christchurch Mosque Shootings." *AFP Factcheck*, March 28, 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Gibson, James. "Political Intolerance in the Context of Democratic Theory." In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Science*, edited by Robert Goodin, 409-28. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2011, pg. 418–19.



Samoa is arguably the most advanced example of majoritarian developments in the Pacific Islands. A 2017 constitutional amendment ordained the country “a Christian nation founded of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”, driven by the Prime Minister’s perception of global “religious wars”.<sup>23</sup> Public discourse leading up to this change included a proposal floated by the head of the council of churches to ban Islam in Samoa, a religious community of less than 50 people in 2016.<sup>24</sup> In other Pacific states, the fear of Islam has fuelled majoritarian intolerance following increasingly publicised incidents of sectarian violence. In Palau, the resettlement of 13 Muslim Uighurs cleared of terror charges exposed a nation-wide distrust of Islam,<sup>25</sup> Tahitian politicians alleged the opening of the first prayer room in the archipelago would expose the territory to extremism,<sup>26</sup> and the Micronesian Congress question what impact the existence of their Muslim community would have on the islands’ society.<sup>27</sup> This experience is also not limited just to Islam; the miniscule Marshallese Jewish community (approx. 20 people as of 2009) were targeted with anti-Semitic graffiti on high-profile buildings.<sup>28</sup>

## Alternative models of prayer

While abandonment is often the go-to proposal when commencement prayers are considered in the public sphere, this paper considers it more practical to discuss alternatives and modifications given the importance to parliaments of conserving tradition. This final section considers modifications to the current models of prayer used throughout Oceania which have the potential to increase their representativeness and inclusivity.

First among these modifications are those which shift the content of the prayer away from Church English and single-faith requests in favour more reflective, representative substance. The expansion to a monotheistic alternative and the delivery of the commencement prayer in different languages adopted in the New Zealand Parliament is one example of applying this method. This approach does have its limitations, excluding poly- and non-theists among others. However, it may be a palatable enough stepping stone for hesitant legislators towards increasingly inclusive alterations. One such option is to shift to a multi-faith model, opting to include prayer from different faith (and potentially non-faith) leaders on specific occasions of importance. To date, no parliament within Oceania trialled anything similar to this, however development in this area may yet eventuate following indications in March 2019 of the potential for a multi-faith modification in the Victorian Parliament.<sup>29</sup>

At the more creative end of alternations is the removal of religious context completely from prayer, secularising the request for guidance made by members at the start of each sitting. No parliament in the region has followed this trajectory yet, however this paper considers it one worthy of further investigation. The way in which the call for higher guidance could be secularised to be as inclusive of members religious and irreligious is challenging, however if well-executed could provide a new regional gold standard for modern parliamentary traditions.

Among these and other suggestions for modification, one model stands out as an effective alternative – the silent prayer/reflection. Currently used in the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and the Australian Capital Territory, members are invited to stand in silence and commit themselves in whichever form they find most appropriate to their duties as legislators. This is infallible against the representation benchmark as there are no outward expressions of religion requiring comparison against population affiliation. It

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<sup>23</sup> Wyeth, Grant. "Samoa Officially Becomes a Christian State." *The Diplomat*, June 17, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> "N.C.C. Calls for a Ban on Islam." *The Samoa Observer*, June 19, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> AP. "Chinese Muslim Uighurs Trigger Public Backlash in Palau." *The Independent*, June 12, 2009.

<sup>26</sup> "Opening of Muslim Prayer Room in Tahiti Causes Uproar." *Radio New Zealand*, October 17, 2013.

<sup>27</sup> "Muslims Held First Annual Conference of Peace in Kosrae." *The Kaselehlie Press*, March 20, 2017

<sup>28</sup> United States of America. Department of State. Office of International Religious Freedom. *2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Marshall Islands*. Washington, D.C., 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Willingham, Richard. "Call for Multi-faith Ceremony to Replace Lord's Prayer during Opening of Victorian Parliament." *ABC News*, March 20, 2019.

simultaneously sets a gold standard for inclusivity as no religion or irreligion is excluded from the process owing to members privately choosing whether to pray or reflect in that time. Its current, successful use in jurisdictions on both sides of Oceania's religious trend dichotomy also illustrates that it is politically sustainable and culturally appropriate for the region.

## Conclusion

Tradition is important; there is significant value in recognising where we have come from and the customs which we have inherited. Of equal importance is keeping our institutions modern, representative, and inclusive of the people and communities from which they are elected. It is the job of parliamentarians and parliamentary officials together to balance these two interests and ensure that parliaments remain representative those of *all* a jurisdiction's people. This paper has introduced two benchmarks to measure commencement prayers to this end and has illustrated through statistical and socio-political trend analysis that across much of the region there is room for improvement. It is this author's intent to spark discussion about how we can do better, and to provide a framework against which to guide those who decide to pursue that conversation further. The change alluded to in this paper is not an attack on religion. It is a recognition that we as a region have and are changing, how we value all members of our societies is too, and that perhaps this reality could be better represented in the symbolism and tradition within our houses of representatives.

## Annex one: Table of Oceanian legislatures' commencement procedures (as of September 2019)

Jurisdiction	House	Prayer read aloud	Denomination	Reflection	Other	SO
Australia	Lower	✓	Christian	-	Acknowledgement of Country	SO30
	Upper	✓	Christian	-	Acknowledgement of Country	SO50
—ACT	Unicameral	-	-	✓	Acknowledgement of Country	SO30
—NSW	Lower	✓	Christian	-	Acknowledgement of Country	SO39
	Upper	✓	Christian	-	Acknowledgement of Country	SO28
—NT	Unicameral	✓	Christian	-	Acknowledgement of Country	SO7
—QLD	Unicameral	✓	Christian	-	Acknowledgement of Country	SsO1(c)
—SA	Lower	✓	Christian	-	Acknowledgement of Country	SO39
	Upper	✓	Christian	-	Acknowledgement of Country	SO51
—VIC	Lower	✓	Christian	-	Acknowledgement of Country	-
	Upper	✓	Christian	-	Acknowledgement of Country	SO1.07
—WA	Lower	✓	Christian	-	Acknowledgement of Country	SO20
	Upper	✓	Christian	-	Acknowledgement of Country	SO14
—TAS	Lower	✓	Christian	-	Acknowledgement of Country	SO22
	Upper	✓	Christian	-	Acknowledgement of Country	SO28
Cook Islands	Unicameral	✓	Christian	-	Closing prayer	SO64
F.S. Micronesia	Unicameral	-	-	✓	Phrased as 'silent prayer'	§5
Fiji	Unicameral	✓	Christian	-		SO30
Kiribati	Unicameral	✓	Christian	-		§16
Marshall Islands	Unicameral	-	-	✓	Phrased as 'silent prayer'	§8
Nauru	Unicameral	✓	Christian	-		SO30
New Zealand	Unicameral	✓	Monotheistic	-		SO62
Niue	Unicameral	✓	Christian	-		SO30
Papua New Guinea	Unicameral	✓	Christian	-		SO34
Samoa	Unicameral	✓	Christian	-		SO45
Solomon Islands	Unicameral	✓	Christian	-		SO13
Tonga	Unicameral	✓	Christian	-		§26
Tuvalu	Unicameral	✓	Christian	-	Adjourns for evening devotions	§19
Vanuatu	Unicameral	✓	Christian	-		SO17

## Annex two: Tables of percentages of religious affiliation in Oceania by jurisdiction

**Table 1: Australian national and sub-national jurisdictions**

Jurisdiction	Religion	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016	2020 (projected)
Australia <sup>1</sup>	Christianity	74.1%	70.9%	68.0%	63.9%	61.1%	52.1%	48.8%
	Irreligion	12.9%	16.7%	15.5%	18.7%	29.9%	29.9%	32.8%
	Other	3.9%	4.9%	6.7%	7.7%	9.9%	11.2%	-
—ACT <sup>2</sup>	Christianity	71.2%	67.1%	64.0%	60.0%	55.1%	45.3%	41.4%
	Irreligion	16.3%	20.0%	19.6%	23.3%	28.8%	36.6%	39.7%
	Other	3.5%	4.4%	5.9%	7.0%	9.7%	12.4%	-
—NSW <sup>3</sup>	Christianity	77.2%	74.0%	71.4%	67.7%	64.5%	55.1%	51.8%
	Irreligion	10.0%	13.4%	11.7%	14.3%	18.0%	25.4%	27.5%
	Other	5.4%	6.5%	9.1%	10.6%	13.0%	14.2%	-
—NT <sup>4</sup>	Christianity	64.6%	63.1%	61.4%	55.3%	55.9%	47.8%	45.2%
	Irreligion	17.9%	21.2%	18.7%	22.6%	23.6%	29.2%	30.7%
	Other	3.8%	3.4%	4.2%	4.7%	5.7%	7.1%	-
—QLD <sup>5</sup>	Christianity	74.0%	71.1%	71.1%	66.3%	64.3%	56.1%	53.5%
	Irreligion	15.2%	14.8%	14.8%	18.5%	22.0%	29.4%	31.6%
	Other	1.9%	2.7%	2.7%	3.2%	4.6%	5.3%	-
—SA <sup>6</sup>	Christianity	70.4%	66.3%	64.1%	59.8%	57.3%	49.2%	46.1%
	Irreligion	17.4%	21.9%	20.6%	24.3%	28.1%	35.9%	38.5%
	Other	1.6%	2.2%	3.2%	4.1%	6.2%	7.8%	-
—VIC <sup>7</sup>	Christianity	70.7%	67.0%	64.5%	60.5%	57.4%	47.8%	44.4%
	Irreligion	14.4%	18.7%	17.3%	20.5%	28.1%	32.0%	34.7%
	Other	5.4%	6.8%	9.0%	10.2%	13.1%	14.5%	-
—WA <sup>8</sup>	Christianity	69.8%	65.7%	63.4%	59.4%	58.1%	49.8%	46.9%
	Irreligion	17.1%	21.5%	19.7%	22.8%	25.5%	32.8%	42.3%
	Other	2.9%	1.3%	5.2%	5.8%	7.8%	9.1%	-

Jurisdiction	Religion	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016	2020 (projected)
—TAS <sup>9</sup>	Christianity	78.4%	72.5%	69.4%	64.2%	59.5%	49.7%	45.4%
	Irreligion	12.2%	16.8%	17.3%	21.6%	28.8%	38.4%	42.3%
	Other	0.7%	1.0%	1.3%	1.7%	2.3%	7.5%	-

<sup>1</sup> “Religion | Australia | Community Profile.” .id. Accessed September 1, 2019. <https://profile.id.com.au/australia/religion>. Drawn from ABS data.

<sup>2</sup> “Religion | Australian Capital Territory | Community Profile.” .id. Accessed September 1, 2019. <https://profile.id.com.au/australia/religion?WebID=170>.

<sup>3</sup> “Religion | New South Wales | Community Profile.” .id. Accessed September 1, 2019. <https://profile.id.com.au/australia/religion?WebID=100>.

<sup>4</sup> “Religion | Northern Territory | Community Profile.” .id. Accessed September 1, 2019. <https://profile.id.com.au/australia/religion?WebID=160>.

<sup>5</sup> “Religion | Queensland | Community Profile.” .id. Accessed September 1, 2019. <https://profile.id.com.au/australia/religion?WebID=120>.

<sup>6</sup> “Religion | South Australia | Community Profile.” .id. Accessed September 1, 2019. <https://profile.id.com.au/australia/religion?WebID=130>.

<sup>7</sup> “Religion | Victoria | Community Profile.” .id. Accessed September 1, 2019. <https://profile.id.com.au/australia/religion?WebID=110>.

<sup>8</sup> “Religion | Western Australia | Community Profile.” .id. Accessed September 1, 2019. <https://profile.id.com.au/australia/religion?WebID=140>.

<sup>9</sup> “Religion | Tasmania | Community Profile.” .id. Accessed September 1, 2019. <https://profile.id.com.au/australia/religion?WebID=150>.

**Table 2: New Zealand & Pacific jurisdictions**

Jurisdiction	Religion	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2020 (projected)
New Zealand <sup>1</sup>	Christianity	76.0%	63.8%	64.2%	58.2%	50.3%	42.9%
	Irreligion	29.1%	26.1%	31.3%	36.1	43.0%	48.0%
	Other	2.4%	2.6%	5.4%	6.9%	8.1%	-
Cook Islands <sup>2</sup>	<b>Religion</b>	<b>1996</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2016</b>	
	Christianity	91.6%	90.2%	88.6%	89.8%	84.5%	
	Irreligion	2.7%	3.6%	3.8%	2.0%	7.0%	
Federated States of Micronesia	Other	3.7%	4.1%	5.1%	8.0%	8.0%	
	<b>Religion</b>	<b>1995*</b>	<b>2015†</b>				
	Christianity	93.3%	94.6%				
Fiji <sup>3</sup>	Irreligion	0.8%	0.9%				
	Other	5.9%	4.5%				
	<b>Religion</b>	<b>1996</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2015†</b>			
Fiji <sup>3</sup>	Christianity	58.0%	64.4%	69.1%			
	Irreligion	0.7%	0.8%	1.0%			
	Other	41.3%	34.7%	30.0%			

<b>Jurisdiction</b>	<b>Religion</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2015</b>	
Kiribati <sup>4</sup>	Christianity	96.4%	97.1%	97.0%	
	Irreligion	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	
	Other	3.5%	2.6%	3.0%	
Marshall Islands	<b>Religion</b>	<b>1995*</b>	<b>2005*</b>	<b>2015†</b>	
	Christianity	95.1%	-	89.6%	
	Irreligion	0.9%	1.4%	1.5%	
	Other	4.0%	3.5%	3.0%	
Nauru <sup>5</sup>	<b>Religion</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>1996</b>		
	Christianity	84.2%	95.0%		
	Irreligion	12.0%	2.4%		
	Other	3.9%	1.5%		
Niue <sup>6</sup>	<b>Religion</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2006</b>
	Christianity	91.9%	84.6%	83.4%	81.4%
	Irreligion	3.2%	11.8%	7.9%	10.0%
	Other	5.0%	3.6%	8.7%	8.6%
Papua New Guinea <sup>7</sup>	<b>Religion</b>	<b>1990*</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2011</b>	
	Christianity	95.1%	95.6%	96.0%	
	Irreligion	0.2%	0.0%	0.6%	
	Other	1.1%	1.4%	1.4%	
Samoa <sup>8</sup>	<b>Religion</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2016</b>
	Christianity	98.4%	97.3%	99.4%	99.3%
	Irreligion	0.1%	2.0%	0.1%	0.2%
	Other	1.2%	0.7%	0.4%	0.5%
Solomon Islands <sup>9</sup>	<b>Religion</b>	<b>1986</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2009</b>	
	Christianity	96.0%	94.7%	96.8%	
	Irreligion	0.5%	0.5%	0.1%	
	Other	3.5%	4.8%	3.1%	

<b>Jurisdiction</b>	<b>Religion</b>	<b>1986</b>	<b>1996</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2011</b>
Tonga <sup>10</sup>	Christianity	96.9%	97.5%	97.2%	97.6%
	Irreligion	-	0.1%	0.0%	0.3%
	Other	3.1%	2.5%	1.1%	1.9%
Tuvalu <sup>11</sup>	<b>Religion</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2017</b>	
	Christianity	94.6%	95.4%	95.7%	
	Irreligion	-	0.2%	0.3%	
	Other	5.4%	2.0%	4.1%	
Vanuatu <sup>12</sup>	<b>Religion</b>	<b>1989</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2009</b>	
	Christianity	77.2%	82.5%	81.5%	
	Irreligion	1.7%	1.0%	1.1%	
	Other	17.0%	15.2%	16.3%	

<sup>1</sup> “Religious affiliation (total responses) by age group and sex, for the census usually resident population count, 2001, 2006, and 2013 Censuses’ Statistics New Zealand. Accessed September 1, 2019. <http://nzdotstat.stats.govt.nz/wbos/Index.aspx? ga=2.190480171.1693512397.1563849420-2054149773.1550566438#>.

<sup>2</sup> “National Census.” Cook Islands Ministry of Finance & Economic Management. Accessed September 1, 2019. <http://www.mfem.gov.ck/statistics/census-and-surveys/census>.

<sup>3</sup> “Religion.” Fiji Bureau of Statistics. Accessed September 1, 2019. <https://www.statsfiji.gov.fj/index.php/statistics/social-statistics/religion>.

<sup>4</sup> See: *2015 Population and Housing Census*. Tarawa, Kiribati: National Statistics Office, 2016; *2010 Census of Population and Housing*. Tarawa, Kiribati: National Statistics Office, 2012, and; *2005 Census of Population*. Vol. 1. Tarawa, Kiribati: National Statistics Office, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> *National Report on Population and Housing*. Yaren: Nauru Statistics Office, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> “Religion.” Statistics Niue, 2012. [https://niue.prism.spc.int/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=40&Itemid=292](https://niue.prism.spc.int/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=40&Itemid=292).

<sup>7</sup> *Papua New Guinea 2011 National Report*. Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea: National Statistics Office, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> See: *2016 Census Brief No. 1*. Apia, Samoa: Samoa Bureau of Statistics, 2016; *Population and Housing Census 2006: Analytical Report*. Apia, Samoa: Samoa Bureau of Statistics, 2011; *Population and Housing Census 2006: Analytical Report*. Apia, Samoa: Samoa Bureau of Statistics, 2006, and; *Population and Housing Census 2001: Analytical Report*. Apia, Samoa: Samoa Bureau of Statistics, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> See “1999 Solomon Islands Population and Housing Census Report.” South Pacific Commission. Accessed September 1, 2019. [https://spccfpstore1...Solomon\\_Islands\\_1999\\_Population\\_Census\\_Analysis\\_Report.pdf](https://spccfpstore1...Solomon_Islands_1999_Population_Census_Analysis_Report.pdf), and; *2009 Population and Housing Census: National Report*. Vol. 2. Honiara, Solomon Islands: National Statistical Office, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> See: *Tonga 2006 Census of Population and Housing: Analytical Report*. Vol. 2. Nuku'alofa: Statistics Department Tonga, 2006, and; *Tonga 2011 Census of Population and Housing: Analytical Report*. Vol. 1. Nuku'alofa: Statistics Department Tonga, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> See: *2017 Population & Housing Mini-Census Preliminary Report*. Funafuti, Tuvalu: Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning and Industries, 2017; “Tuvalu Population and Housing Census 2012.” Pacific Data Hub Microdata Library, October 17, 2018. Tuvalu Population and Housing Census 2012, and; *Tuvalu Demographic and Health Survey 2007*. Funafuti, Tuvalu: Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning and Industries, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> *2009 National Population and Housing Census*. Vol. 2. Port Vila, Vanuatu: National Statistics Office, 2009.

<sup>†</sup> From the corresponding section in: Association of Religious Data Archives. “Religious Characteristics of States Dataset Project.” State College; PA, 2015.

<sup>\*</sup> From the corresponding section in: Association of Religious Data Archives. “World Religion Project: National Religion Dataset.” State College; PA, 1995.