



AMEN

A history of prayers
in Parliament

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PM Glynn Institute
Occasional Paper

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Prayers in Parliament

THE RITUAL OF PARLIAMENT

At the beginning of each daily sitting of the House of Representatives, the Speaker says:

I acknowledge the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples who are the traditional custodians of the Canberra area and pay respect to the elders, past and present, of all Australia's Indigenous peoples.

It has been so at every sitting since the 43rd Parliament in 2010.

After this Acknowledgement of Country, the Speaker says the following two prayers:

Almighty God, we humbly beseech Thee to vouchsafe Thy blessing upon this Parliament. Direct and prosper our deliberations to the advancement of Thy glory, and the true welfare of the people of Australia.

Our Father, which art in Heaven: Hallowed be Thy Name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil: For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

It has been so at every sitting since the 1st Parliament in 1901.

These prayers have remained the same since Parliament began. They are a central part of the ritual of Parliament; a ceremony that has expanded to include the Acknowledgement of Country.

Bret Walker SC noted in his 2018 Whitlam Oration that the recitation of the acknowledgement of traditional owners contains real—albeit formulaic—information. He warned that the practice should not be deprecated for becoming formulaic, “given that the Missal and the Book of Common Prayer are themselves composed of liturgical formulae”.

Together, the Acknowledgement of Country and the prayers recognise two ancient traditions of wisdom which are founding parts of the Australian story. These traditions continue to live and grow in two diverse and important communities in Australia. They are invoked each day at the commencement of Parliament's work in a simple ritual, which is at once an expression of gratitude and reverence for how these traditions have shaped our country, and an expression of confidence and hope in the future that they help to make possible.

Both traditions are particular but neither is exclusive. The wisdom they offer is shared and can be drawn on by everyone. There are many such traditions at home in Australia today, and these two particular traditions stand for them too. In this, they remind parliamentarians of our dependence on each other and the greater responsibilities they have to something higher. For legislators, this something higher is first and foremost solidarity and the common good. Whether their responsibilities to these good things are understood by individual Members of Parliament as ultimately transcendent and spiritual, or purely social and communal, the Acknowledgement of Country and the prayers put before them each day in Parliament reflect the greater purpose they are called to serve.

In the cut and thrust of political life, it is easy to forget that the ritual of Parliament recognises these ancient traditions each day. This pamphlet contains a brief account of part of that ritual: prayers in Parliament.

INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

The legislatures of most common law countries open their daily proceedings with prayer.

United Kingdom

The practice of saying prayers at the Palace of Westminster is believed to have started in about 1558, and was common practice by 1567. The present form of prayers probably dates from the reign of Charles II. MPs and Peers stand during the prayers, turning to face the wall behind them—it is thought this practice developed due to the difficulty of kneeling to pray whilst wearing a sword!

In the House of Commons, the prescribed prayer is recited by the Speaker's Chaplain.

In the House of Lords, a prayer is recited by one of the Lords Spiritual (a Bishop of the Church of England), and the text can either be the Lord's Prayer, a Psalm, or a prayer from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer.

United States

Prior to American Independence in 1776, it was commonplace for colonial legislatures in America to have chaplains who would open legislative proceedings with prayer. Following Independence, the Congress of the United States continued the practice of employing chaplains to open proceedings with prayer. Both the House and Senate chaplains are elected as individuals, not as representatives of any religious body or denomination.

The first chaplain to the House of Representatives was appointed to the role in 1789. Historically, chaplains to the House were drawn from the main Protestant denominations—Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist. In more recent years, Catholic priests such as the present chaplain to the House of Representatives, Father Patrick J. Conroy SJ, have also served.

The United States’ Senate also opens its sessions with prayer led by a chaplain. As with the House, all Senate chaplains have been drawn from various Christian traditions. The present chaplain, Reverend Dr. Barry C. Black, is the first African American and first Seventh-day Adventist to serve in the position.

Unlike the practice in Britain and the Commonwealth of Nations, the prayers in both the House and Senate are not prescribed. A different one for each daily sitting is typically selected or composed by the chaplain. Historically, these prayers have been Christian in nature, although in more recent times they have tended to be more ecumenical. In 2009, further new ground was broken when a Hindu prayer was recited at the invitation of the chaplain to the House of Representatives. In the same year, the Appeals Court of the District of Columbia decided that prayers must remain religious in nature, ruling out atheist chaplains from leading prayers.

Canada

In Canada, the House of Commons has opened its daily proceedings with prayer since 1877, although the practice was not codified in the standing orders until 1927. In 1994, a new prayer was adopted after the House accepted a report recommending a prayer that is more reflective of the different religions embraced by Canadians. It discontinued the use of the Lord’s Prayer but retained the practice of offering a non-sectarian prayer addressed to ‘Almighty God’.

New Zealand

In 1854, New Zealand’s House of Representatives voted to open daily proceedings with a prayer, which would be determined by a committee. Following a number of alterations, a parliamentary prayer which was distinctly Christian was adopted by resolution of the House in 1962. A review of the standing orders in 2014 acknowledged that “not all members identify with the practice of reading a Christian prayer at the opening of a sitting of the House, although it is a tradition of very long standing” and recommended that “the Speaker should consult members in the new Parliament about the prayer”.

In 2018, the Speaker introduced a revised prayer featuring modernised English and with references to the Queen and Jesus Christ removed. The adoption of the new prayer attracted protest and the prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, conceded that the Speaker should have consulted more widely before adopting the changes. As of 2018, New Zealand’s parliamentary prayer is now closely aligned with the current Australian prayers.

AUSTRALIAN PRACTICE

Commonwealth Parliament

The daily recitation of prayers in the House of Representatives was established in 1901 on the motion of the first Member for Kooyong, William Knox. (Knox, a Presbyterian businessman, was also widely considered the mastermind behind another Australian institution—the mining giant BHP.) The current Member for Kooyong, Josh Frydenberg, speaking in the *Australian Jewish News*, described the prayers as “one of the Parliament’s many fine and proud traditions”.

Standing Order 38 of the House of Representatives provides for the procedure described at the opening of this pamphlet.

Standing Order 50 of the Senate stipulates that the following prayer shall be said:

Almighty God, we humbly beseech Thee to vouchsafe Thy special blessing upon this Parliament, and that Thou wouldst be pleased to direct and prosper the work of Thy servants to the advancement of Thy glory, and to the true welfare of the people of Australia.

This is followed by the Lord’s Prayer, and then the Acknowledgement of Country.

According to longstanding practice, participation in parliamentary prayers remains voluntary. No parliamentarian is required to recite prayers, or even be present in the chamber when the prayers are read each day. Accordingly, if MPs believe in their conscience that they cannot partake in a practice such as parliamentary prayer, they are not in any way constrained to participate. The existing practice allows those MPs who wish to join the Speaker in reciting the Lord’s Prayer—from their own religious convictions or from other reasons—to do so, while respecting the convictions of those who do not wish to pray at all.

State and Territory legislatures

The legislative chambers of each State and Territory of Australia, with the exception of the Australian Capital Territory, have standing orders that require the presiding officer or another officer to read a prayer to the chamber at the commencement of proceedings.

The prayers that are said in the various legislative chambers throughout Australia are set out in the appendix to this pamphlet.

Since 1995, Standing Order 30 of the ACT’s Legislative Assembly has provided:

Upon the Speaker taking the Chair at the commencement of each sitting, and a quorum of Members being present, the following shall be read:

Members, at the beginning of this sitting of the Assembly, I would ask you to stand in silence and pray or reflect on our responsibilities to the people of the Australian Capital Territory.

The Speaker shall also acknowledge, at the beginning of each sitting day, that the Assembly is meeting on the lands of the traditional custodians.

This invitation either to pray or reflect remains unique amongst Australian legislative practices.

Attempts to abolish parliamentary prayers

Since the introduction of prayers in the Commonwealth Parliament in 1901, there have been several attempts to amend or abolish prayers in the Senate, all of which have been rejected. The main arguments advanced in favour of their abolition have been that Christian prayers are no longer appropriate in a legislature that represents a modern, secular, and multi-faith polity.

One proposal that has been mooted would see the prayers replaced with a period of quiet personal reflection, following the current practice in the ACT. In 2010, a variation of the ACT provision was proposed by the Australian Greens and rejected by the Senate.

In 2018, the Australian Greens successfully moved that the Senate's Standing Committee on Procedure review a proposal to replace the prayers with: "Senators, let us, in silence, pray or reflect upon our responsibilities to all people of Australia, and to future generations". The Committee reported back to the Senate that it believed there was no reason to alter the prayers, concluding: "The committee does not consider, on the evidence before it and after its own deliberations, that there is a momentum for change".

The Committee noted some possible alternatives to the proposal, namely that an invitation to personal prayer or reflection could be inserted alongside the current prayers, such as "Senators, I invite you, as I read the prayer, to pray or reflect in your own way on your responsibilities to the people of Australia and to future generations". The Committee also noted that the President might be empowered to authorise another Senator to read the prayers. The Committee stopped short of recommending either of these alternatives.

The conclusion by the Senate Standing Committee on Procedure reflects the fact that many Australians still believe in God and pray at least occasionally, if not more often. It is sometimes easy to forget that many Australians believe Jesus has a special connection to God. So long as prayer and religious observance in some shape or form remains an important feature of many lives in electorates across Australia, there is nothing anomalous about elected representatives saying prayers in Parliament. And so long as parliamentarians continue to participate voluntarily and in significant numbers, albeit not unanimously, prayers do not represent a mere cultural relic. Rather, they help strengthen many Australian citizens' confidence in public life.

WHAT IS PRAYER?

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James (1842–1910), the influential Harvard University philosopher and a founding father of modern psychology, observes that prayer “in the wider sense” means “every kind of inward communication or conversation with the power recognised as divine”. James regards prayer as the very heart of religion. This would seem to be because, if one believes that there is a divine power with which human beings may have some sort of relationship, then communication with that divine power will be of fundamental significance in forming and sustaining that relationship.

This centrality of prayer to religious life is not a feature unique to Christianity, or even the Abrahamic faiths. Hindus, for instance, also attach great significance to it. Mahatma Gandhi said, “Prayer is the very soul and essence of religion, and therefore prayer must be the very core of the life of man”.

Although prayer is usually offered according to particular doctrinal beliefs, its universal practice makes it not so much exceptional to human experience as rudimentary and typical of human experience. Notwithstanding a rise in atheism in Western countries, even some of those who do not believe in any God report that they have prayed in trying circumstances or to find an answer to some pressing question.

Prayer implicitly recognises the power of a supreme being—or beings—over human affairs. In many religions this extends to requests for assistance in a process of personal moral renewal. It also serves an important emotional purpose for people of many faiths. In the midst of life’s challenges and upheavals, prayer can bring comfort, healing, consolation, and assurance.

Prayer need not be concerned solely with the affairs of the individual offering the prayer, but can be offered by one person for the benefit of someone else, in what is traditionally known as intercession. Such prayers can be said for a family member, a friend, a colleague, an acquaintance, a stranger, or—as Jesus encouraged—even for an enemy. People can also pray for groups of people, such as their community and their country.

In the parliamentary context, the purpose of prayer is to ask God to bless the Parliament and to guide and help prosper its many deliberations. The prayer for Parliament might be seen as a prayer of intercession by the President or Speaker, who seeks God’s blessing and guidance not for himself or herself, but for all members of the legislative chamber and their work together.

As the prayers are recited in the chamber, Australian parliamentarians can also pray for the people they represent. In this simple gesture, which is entirely personal and private, parliamentarians are recalled to those matters which are above politics, and also at the same time at the heart of politics: in particular, the importance of clear-sighted service of people and communities to build up the country as a whole. The prayers are an important marker in each parliamentary day, reminding legislators of their role in the lives of others and the important trust they hold from the people who elected them.

UNDERSTANDING THE PRAYERS

Prayers can be understood on many levels, ranging from the literal to the symbolic, from the religious to the psychological, from the ethical to the cultural, and from the theological to the historical. These various dimensions of prayer as they relate to the prayers in Parliament can only be canvassed in an introductory way here. It should be remembered that the meaning of any prayer also draws on the intention of those offering the prayer.

The Prayer for Parliament

The opening petition requests God’s wisdom and direction for Australia’s leaders whilst they exercise their duties in Parliament.

Almighty God

By addressing the prayer to *Almighty God*, the prayer for Parliament reflects the opening words of the preamble to the Australian Constitution which established the Parliament:

Whereas the people . . . humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God . . .

we humbly beseech Thee to vouchsafe Thy blessing upon this Parliament

The prayer is made by the parliamentarians who ask (*beseech*) God to bestow (*vouchsafe*) a blessing onto Parliament. The term *vouchsafe* is a poetical term favoured in Shakespeare’s work, appearing sixty times in his corpus, which is used here to add a solemn tone. The prayer makes a request to God in humility, acknowledging human imperfection and need for help from a higher power when dealing with weighty issues.

Direct and prosper our deliberations to the advancement of Thy glory

The phrase *to the advancement of Thy glory* reflects the underlying belief that God is the source of all life and that God’s glory is advanced when people seek to order their own lives and the community in which they live in accordance with God’s justice, mercy and generosity. The work of the Parliament advances God’s glory by advancing justice, peace and prosperity.

and the true welfare of the people of Australia

The prayer requests God’s blessing not only for those assembled in Parliament, but also for the welfare of Australia so that all Australians can prosper. It is noteworthy that it requests true welfare and so points to welfare in its deepest and best senses. Although welfare includes economic prosperity and physical security, it extends beyond these needs to the broader conditions which allow both individual and communal flourishing.

The Lord’s Prayer

The words of the Lord’s Prayer come from the Gospels—that part of the Christian Bible providing an account of the “good news” (i.e. “gospel”) of Jesus’ life. Its basis in Christian Scripture means that it is recognised by all Christian churches and traditions. According to

the Gospels, this prayer was given by Jesus in response to a request from his followers (or disciples) to teach them how to pray. For this reason, in some traditions it is called “The Model Prayer”, as it was given as a model for how Christians should communicate with God. It has a special significance for Christians as a prayer Jesus himself prayed, and which encourages us to approach God in the familiar or intimate terms of ‘father’.

The Lord’s Prayer was explicitly created for personal use, but has also been used regularly in the church services (liturgy) of both Eastern and Western Christianity for nearly two millennia.

Although the origin of the Lord’s Prayer is in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the content is in fact not narrowly Christian. It is an appeal to the divine as the source and creator of all creatures, so the “our” in “Our Father” is able to encompass many people of different religious traditions and spiritualities. By reason of its inclusive nature it has largely been uncontroversial in parliamentary use.

Our Father

The prayer begins with the words, *Our Father*, an address to a God who is tender and protective, like a parent, and who is always available to listen to the concerns of our minds and hearts.

which art in Heaven

Heaven is the state of being in which God is fully present. This is sometimes misunderstood as simply a far away spiritual realm. In Christian belief, heaven is the place of supreme and definitive happiness where human beings have complete fullness of life with God.

Hallowed be Thy Name

This is the first request of the prayer. It asks God to reveal himself to the world by making good on all the kind promises in Scripture, so that God’s name will be revered and glorified. It also stands as a heading over the whole prayer, asking God to respond to the petitions that follow.

Thy Kingdom come

The word *Kingdom* (in the original Greek, *basileia*) refers to the authority or reign of God. This reign is promised to be one of true justice and mercy, a reign that is only partially experienced today, but which is built up and sustained by the work and sacrifice of human beings, in cooperation with God and with each other, in service of the common good.

Thy will be done in earth, as it is in Heaven

Thy will refers to God’s plan and intention. This petition asks that God’s will for human flourishing and fulfilment be realised—at least in part—today. It implicitly recognises human frailty in directing our own affairs as it requests God’s assistance.

Give us this day our daily bread

This is a request for the ordinary needs of life. In acknowledging God as the source of all nourishment, it also acknowledges God as the source of all life.

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us

This petition acknowledges human wrong-doing. It also voices an expectation that those seeking forgiveness and mercy should also forgive others. Forgiveness and recognition of imperfection flows from a relationship with God into relationships with other human beings. The petition underscores the importance of cooperation and patience even in difficult contexts, which is powerfully appropriate in adversarial parliamentary debate.

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil

This is sometimes translated as “save us from the time of testing or trial”—a worthy request for parliamentarians to pray in serving their nation! These petitions recognise that there is evil in the world and ask God to protect and help us in overcoming it. Deliverance from evil can be asked for an individual personally, or for communities, the country, or the whole human family—for whomever the prayer is being offered. In the parliamentary context, it is a request to God to help parliamentarians in their own lives and in our national life to resist the influence of evil and instead to choose the good.

For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever

The concluding line, which was added by early Christians, is a joyful affirmation of the promises in the prayer.

Amen

The Hebrew word *Amen* gives personal assent to the prayer. It is one of heartfelt agreement—“SO BE IT!”

PRAYER AS AN EXPRESSION OF HOPE AND CONFIDENCE IN CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC LIFE

Parliamentary prayers express our deep hope and confidence in public life.

The common good

In 2008, in the midst of an attempt to abolish parliamentary prayers, the prime minister Kevin Rudd, along with the opposition leaders Malcolm Turnbull and Warren Truss, firmly rejected proposals to replace the Lord’s Prayer with the Acknowledgement of Country alone. They all agreed that the practice of saying prayers is a longstanding and non-partisan tradition which re-affirms parliamentarians’ commitment to the common good of Australia.

The common good can be defined simply as the shared life of the nation. However, it is much more than that. The common good looks to the conditions which allow all people—not just a majority or the greatest number—to flourish, both as individuals and in community. It refers to the good things we share as a nation; among them trust, cooperation, integrity, learning,

generosity and commitment: good things we depend on for a rewarding life—and for effective parliaments. In this way, the common good transcends both individual and collective benefit while fostering both. Without those things which constitute the common good, neither individual life nor collective life can flourish as it should. The common good arises from the choices Australians make about what is important, so it needs to be nurtured. It cannot be imposed from the top down by any government program. Its strength or weakness depends on how we decide to live: for ourselves alone, or in solidarity with other people, finding our own fulfilment in theirs.

People of various faiths have argued that religion serves an important role in public life by prioritising the common good. For example, the former Chief Rabbi of the Commonwealth, Lord Sacks of Aldgate, argues that public religion provides an antidote to the Hobbesian view that life is about individual interests, a view that if normalised leads back to Hobbes' image of life in a state of nature as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short". Without religion, Rabbi Sacks argues, the ultimate focus of public life becomes "What's in it for me?"—to the exclusion of "What's in it for all of us?" People of different faiths have argued that we need bigger ideas than the self in order to live together, and that religion is a valuable resource for this.

Australian heritage

Parliamentary Prayers are also an important reminder of Australia's Christian heritage. Christianity lies at the heart of many of Australia's institutions, and it is worthwhile to remember these foundations. They include our commitment to human rights (which is rooted in the idea that every person is created with equal value) and the priority given to a strong welfare state in Australia to ensure that people in need of help are not abandoned.

Even though modern Australia is now a nation comprising adherents of many faiths (and none), the historic Christian contribution to the formation of the nation, its institutions, and its values is undeniable. Part of this is a living legacy expressed in the fact that millions of Australians continue to live their lives according to the Christian faith: the census conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2016 revealed that Christianity is still the religion of 52 per cent of the population.

The legacy also lies in the contribution Christianity has made historically to shaping Australia. Some of these contributions, by no means all of them, are listed below:

- The Woman's Christian Temperance Union is recognised by historians as the driving force behind the institution of female suffrage as a world-first in Australia and New Zealand;
- The recognition of workers' rights has strong Methodist roots (notably the activists dubbed the Tolpuddle Martyrs, who were banished to Australia), and much of Australia's 'fair go' culture comes from this movement—indeed, it has often been said that the Labor Party Movement "owes more to Methodism than to Marx";

- Sunday penalty rates were derived from Biblical teaching regarding a rest-day;
- Catholic social teaching famously influenced Justice Higgins’ reasoning in the *Harvester* case that established the world-first living wage (it is noteworthy that Justice Higgins was the key proposer of section 116 in the Constitution, concerning non-establishment of religion—he clearly still saw a role for religion in the public square);
- Notable pioneers of the Indigenous rights movement included churchmen such as the Reverend William Cooper, the principal founder of what is now NAIDOC Week;
- In the business sphere, the Australian Mutual Provident Fund (AMP) was founded by Congregationalist Christians to provide assistance and insurance to working people on a mutual-support basis, which it did for 150 years until it was ‘demutualised’ in the late 1990s;
- The nineteenth-century Australian Temperance Movement popularised beer in Australia as an alternative to strong spirits (beer was seen as a lesser social vice to the much more destructive effects of spirits on families and communities).

Australian society has been shaped and improved by Christianity in many different ways—many more ways than a list like this can capture. Christianity’s contributions have fostered a concept of human dignity and social advancement which have strengthened and deepened Australia’s lived fraternity.

The power of speech

Parliament is a place of speech, dialogue, and debate. So the significance of the right words in such a place cannot be overstated. The words of the prayers make a significant contribution to this: they include words of forgiveness, reconciliation, comfort, humility, and many others which inspire and encourage.

Comfort

The idea that there is a greater power to assist a fallible parliamentarian counterbalances the stresses of Parliament. In 1997, the Labor Senator John Faulkner, noting that the practice of parliamentary prayer was “not compulsory”, remarked that it should continue because the “prayers give comfort and inspiration to some senators, and many in the community”.

Humility

The prayer for Parliament is offered ‘humbly’—a gesture that serves as a welcome check on political arrogance. Prayers in Parliament remind our nation’s leaders that they are not a law unto themselves but are accountable to a higher authority—and to their electors. In an opinion piece for the ABC, the Centre for Public Christianity’s John Dickson writes:

Whatever else prayer might be, it is an act of humility. There is something beautiful and noble about our leaders acknowledging they are not ‘top dog’ in the universe—

expressing out loud that they are accountable to Something higher than themselves and that, despite their commitment to using every faculty of human reason, they could do with some outside assistance.

Forgiveness

Labor frontbencher Ed Husic—who took his oath on the Koran—quoted the Lord’s Prayer from the dispatch box in the House of Representatives whilst speaking on the power of forgiveness. He highlighted the prayer’s petitions for forgiveness and reconciliation as a force for good which binds Parliament together, and in turn the nation.

Reconciliation

Prayer can be a springboard for reconciliation in our national story. Aboriginal leader Uncle Graham Paulson has suggested that the petitions in the Lord’s Prayer, “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” are the right “first step” on the journey towards the practical aspects of Indigenous and non-Indigenous reconciliation. Paulson says, “we need to become caught up in the spirit of forgiveness—if that’s successful—that opens up the way for justice to flow”.

Words for our world

For reasons such as these, Michael Kirby, in his foreword to Judge Weeramantry’s book, *The Lord’s Prayer—Bridge to a Better World*, writes that “virtually every word [of the Lord’s Prayer] offers some insight relevant to the world we live in”. In doing so, Kirby links the words of the prayer to the world in the broadest sense.

CONTEXTS FOR THINKING ABOUT PARLIAMENTARY PRAYER

Historical context

The 1662 Book of Common Prayer, which specifies the liturgical prayer of the Church of England and serves as an historical basis for contemporary Anglican liturgy, contains “A Prayer for the High Court of Parliament, to be read during their Session”. This has formed the basis for subsequent prayers for Parliament in the English-speaking world, including the Australian prayer which was penned by Hallam, Lord Tennyson (son of the poet, Alfred, Lord Tennyson) when he was serving as Governor of South Australia. Thus, Puig and Tudor, writing in the *Public Law Review*, identify “an apparent Anglican provenance” for the wording of the current prayers. This is not to say, however, that the prayer for Parliament was an exclusively Anglican project. There was significant lobbying from other churches and traditions, with the Presbyterian Church being recorded as a particularly vocal voice for its inclusion.

The history of sectarian prejudice that divided Protestant denominations and the Catholic Church in Australia influenced early discussions about the institution of prayers in

Parliament. First, in relation to the Lord's Prayer, it was suggested by Thomas Carr, the Catholic archbishop of Melbourne in a letter to a Melbourne newspaper on 15 June 1901, that the version of the Lord's Prayer in a recent Protestant version of the Bible was acceptable to both Catholics and Protestants. The wording that was adopted, however, was from the older and well-known King James Version. This older translation of the Lord's Prayer is nearly identical to the translation that the Vatican recommends today.

The main difference between the two versions is the final line of the prayer. In the King James Version, the prayer concludes: "For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever". In Catholic practice, this line is not part of the prayer. During the celebration of the Mass, the Lord's Prayer is recited, followed by another prayer said by the priest alone, after which everybody recites this line together. Outside the context of the Mass, this line is not commonly used by Catholics. It is not unacceptable, however, for Catholics to say this line, even though it is irregular in Catholic practice outside the Mass. While the prayers have been viewed by some through the lens of sectarianism, it was not the Lord's Prayer that was sectarian, but rather the approach of the participants in the earlier discussion. This led to a misconception that the prayers themselves are a symbol of sectarian division. However, this is not the case.

The Lord's Prayer of Matthew's Gospel is familiar to all Christian believers. Since the church's formative era, this prayer, with its seven petitions addressed to God, has been a point of unity. The early Church Father, Tertullian, even described it as a summary of the whole Christian message.

There is no doubting the Christian character of the prayers in Parliament, but like the prayers of other religious traditions, they are able to speak to people of all faiths and none.

Legal context

A question that is occasionally raised concerns the legal status of parliamentary prayers. It has been suggested that they might be unconstitutional, given that section 116 of the Australian Constitution states:

The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth.

Puig and Tudor provide strong arguments for why section 116, which has been interpreted narrowly by the High Court, would not support a claim of unconstitutionality. First, the High Court would be unlikely to interpret section 116 as applying to the Houses of the Parliament "in any capacity other than as makers of law" and "given that s 116 is directed to 'law', it follows that the High Court would be unlikely to accept that it includes standing orders made under s 50, such as those that require the reading of parliamentary prayers".

Additionally, “the High Court has refused to limit the unlimited discretion of either House of Parliament to order and conduct its business and proceedings under ss 49 and 50 of the Constitution”.

The question of legality has, however, been tested in the United States. Its Constitution’s non-establishment clause provided the model for section 116. The appointment of chaplains to read prayers in Congress has occasionally been challenged for breaching the separation between church and state. These challenges have been unsuccessful. In the 1983 case of *Marsh v Chambers*, the constitutionality of legislative chaplains was upheld by the Supreme Court on the grounds of precedent and tradition. The Court cited the practice going back to the Continental Congress in 1774, and noted that the custom “is deeply embedded in the history and tradition of this country” since colonial times and the founding of the republic. Furthermore, the Court held that the use of prayer “has become part of the fabric of our society”, co-existing with “the principles of disestablishment and religious freedom”. This decision was cited in *Murray v Buchanan*, which challenged the House chaplaincy later in 1983. In the 2004 case of *Newdow v Eagen*, the District Court for the District of Columbia cited *Marsh v Chambers* to dismiss a suit that challenged the congressional practice of paid chaplains as well as the practice of opening legislative sessions with prayer. Such cases are instructive, if not authoritative, in the Australian context. Constitutional challenges to parliamentary prayer have been unsuccessful in both the United States and Canada, and as it stands, there appears to be no constitutional impediment to the existing practice of parliamentary prayers in Australia either.

BRIDGING THE DIVIDES

For over a century, the ritual of saying prayers in Parliament has reminded parliamentarians of divides that need to be bridged: the divide between the secular and the religious; the divide between creeds and denominations; and the divide between the transcendent and the mundane.

Bridging the secular-religious divide

Calls for changing the ritual of Parliament have often focused on questions about the probity of such a practice in an allegedly secular public square.

The very term *secular* is much more complex than is often understood. The original meaning of secular in Australia is demonstrated by South Australia’s first Education Act, which provided that:

... schools established [under this Act] ... shall maintain *good secular instruction, based on the Christian Religion*; apart from all theological and controversial differences on discipline and doctrine, and that no denominational catechism be used (emphasis added).

The idea of “secular instruction based on the Christian Religion” might sound paradoxical to the modern ear, but the notion of a secular public square originally meant a non-sectarian or non-denominational public square. It certainly still meant a religious—and probably Christian—public square. This models what might be called ‘inclusive secularism’. Inclusive secularism recognises that the rich and complex public life of Australia includes religion, and does not seek to banish expressions of faith to the strictly private sphere.

Saying prayers in Parliament demonstrates that it is possible for religion to find appropriate expression in a secular public square in a diverse and complex society, and demonstrates a greater inclusiveness than the narrow and homogenous secularism which would cast religion out of public life altogether.

An exemplar of inclusive secularism is the retired Indigenous magistrate, Pat O’Shane. Although a resolute atheist, she rose at the 1998 Constitutional Convention to speak in support of retaining some reference to God in the preamble to the constitution of a future Australian republic:

I rise as probably the most committed atheist in the chamber. . . . As I understand it, in any event, the word ‘God’ is a generic term. I am sure that the clerics in the audience will debate that issue, but I am speaking, as I have already admitted, as an atheist. I believe that our preamble must be *all-inclusive*. This is a statement of the Australian people about who we are and the values that we hold dear. *I find the words unexceptional*. I want to endorse the proposal to retain these words in the preamble (emphasis added).

O’Shane demonstrates the non-ideological, inclusive secularism that has been part of the story of Australia since European settlement. Australians do not want religion—or anything else—forced upon them, but nor do they want the expression of people’s beliefs utterly excluded from the public sphere.

Developing strong interfaith relationships

The prayers currently said in Parliament have the capacity to transcend the divide between different faiths. Rabbi Moshe Gutnick, president of the Organisation of Rabbis of Australasia, told the Australian Jewish News that there “definitely” should be a prayer that is at least similar to the current prayers that begin parliamentary proceedings, explaining, “From a Jewish perspective, the acknowledgement of God’s sovereignty is universal to all of humankind”.

When the Dalai Lama visited Canberra in 1992, a Liberal backbencher, Alasdair Webster, took the opportunity to ask him about the Buddhist perspective on references to God in Australian public life. His Holiness is reported to have explained that a Buddhist would have no qualms about this, saying that “at the end of the day it is the same supreme being”.

Speaking in the House of Representatives, Labor's Anne Aly provided a Muslim perspective on the Lord's Prayer:

Coming from a practising Muslim household, I would read from the Bible and sing hymns at morning chapel service while fasting for the holy month of Ramadan and celebrating the holy days of Eid. When I asked my mother what I should do during chapel service when we read the Lord's Prayer, she responded that I should also bow my head in prayer and remember that we all worship the same God.

The acknowledgement of God's sovereignty over human affairs is something common to most faiths practised in Australia. This broad base of support is not an accident. It reflects the continuing importance of faith to human beings, even in modern, secular, and multifaith societies like Australia.

The pledge of toleration in higher things

The prayer for Parliament is addressed to Almighty God, echoing the words of the Australian Constitution. It was Patrick McMahon Glynn who successfully moved that a recognition of Almighty God be included in the preamble to the Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act. Glynn explained that he proposed the words "humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God" because they are

simple and unsectarian. They are expressive of our ultimate hope of the final end of all our aspirations, of the great elemental truth upon which all our creeds are based and towards which the lines of our faiths converge. . . . In an affirmation of pure reverence and submission such as this, the adherents of all creeds, sinking their differences of form and method, can join, and will find the spirit of toleration in them growing strong under a sense of their common aim. *It will thus become the pledge of religious toleration.* (emphasis added)

In *The Europeans in Australia*, Alan Atkinson argues that in proposing a reference to God in the Constitution, Glynn sought to capture something "ubiquitous and vast":

[Glynn] was trying to find words which might express ancient but still living habits of association. . . . He wanted a reminder as to what the people did among themselves, how they existed among themselves, as a body. Glynn spoke . . . [of] a spirit moving through nations, guiding people . . . to higher things. Glynn's God surfaces in innumerable small phenomena, eternal but ephemeral.

Glynn saw the need for some antidote to cynicism and materialism in public life, and the need to "set in our Constitution something that may at times remind us of ideals beyond the counter, and of hopes that life is higher than the vulgar realities of the day". Prayers in Parliament serve the same purpose and provide the same pledge of toleration and inclusion in Australia today.

The invocation of Almighty God, in both the Preamble and the Prayers in Parliament, imposes no belief on Australians. It does however remind us, especially at those moments when (in Glynn's words to the 1898 Convention) "the puzzle of life and destiny staggers the sense, when the shadow is cast and obscures the vision, and the best of us feel our weakness and loosening grip of the unseen", of the bridge between the ordinary and the immeasurable, between the mundane and the transcendent. Each day the ritual of Parliament, in both the Acknowledgement of Country and the prayers, calls legislators back to humble reliance on higher things, to the relative insignificance of our differences before the great vastness to which we all belong.

UNLIKELY WORDS BEFORE THE USUAL DISORDER

The Italian novelist Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa begins *The Leopard*, his masterpiece about Sicilian society at a time of great political upheaval during the Risorgimento, thus:

"Nunc et in hora moritis nostrae. Amen."

The daily recital of the Rosary was over. For half an hour the steady voice of the Prince had recalled the Sorrowful and the Glorious Mysteries; for half an hour other voices had interwoven a lilting hum from which, now and again, would chime some unlikely word; love, virginity, death; and during that hum the whole aspect of the rococo drawing-room seemed to change . . .

Now, as the voices fell silent, everything dropped back into its usual order or disorder.

The daily ritual of Parliament serves a similar purpose. For a couple of minutes, the steady voice of the Speaker invokes unlikely words, and the whole aspect of the chamber seems to change before the voices of politics are heard, and everything drops back into its usual political order or disorder. The prayers in Parliament are part of these unlikely words; part of a moment of recollection, reverence, and re-orientation which helps to steer and sustain the labours and struggles that follow. They are needed, these unlikely words of acknowledgement and prayer. Without them, we lose sight of what brings us together.

Appendix

STANDING ORDERS FOR PRAYERS IN AUSTRALIAN LEGISLATURES

Commonwealth

House of Representatives

Standing Order 38:

The Speaker shall read the following prayers:

Almighty God, we humbly beseech Thee to vouchsafe Thy blessing upon this Parliament. Direct and prosper our deliberations to the advancement of Thy glory, and the true welfare of the people of Australia.

Followed by the Lord's Prayer.

Senate

Standing Order 50:

The President, on taking the chair each day, shall read the following prayers:

Almighty God, we humbly beseech Thee to vouchsafe Thy special blessing upon this Parliament, and that Thou wouldst be pleased to direct and prosper the work of Thy servants to the advancement of Thy glory, and to the true welfare of the people of Australia.

Followed by the Lord's Prayer.

New South Wales

Legislative Assembly

Standing Order 39:

The Speaker or the Clerk shall read the following prayer after the Speaker takes the Chair each day:

Almighty God, we ask for your blessing upon this Parliament. Direct and prosper our deliberations to the true welfare of Australia and the people of New South Wales. Amen.

Legislative Council

Standing Order 28:

The President, on taking the Chair each day, shall read the following prayers:

Almighty God, we humbly beseech Thee to vouchsafe Thy blessing upon this Parliament. Direct and prosper our deliberations to the advancement of Thy glory, and the true welfare of the people of our State and Australia.

Followed by the Lord's Prayer.

Queensland

Legislative Assembly

During the first session of the First Parliament, the Legislative Assembly passed a resolution to open each sitting day of Parliament with a prayer. The prayer that was adopted and is used by the current Legislative Assembly is as follows:

MOST GRACIOUS GOD: We humbly beseech Thee, as for this State in general, so especially for the Parliament of Queensland under our Most Religious and Gracious Queen at this time assembled: That Thou wouldst be pleased to direct and prosper all our consultations, to the advancement of Thy glory, the good of Thy Church, the safety, honour, and welfare of our Sovereign and this portion of Her Commonwealth; that all things may be so ordered and settled by our endeavours upon the best and surest foundations; that peace and happiness, truth and justice, religion and piety may be established among us for all generations. These and all other necessities, for us, and Thy whole Church, we humbly beg in the Name and Mediation of Jesus Christ, our Most Blessed Lord and Saviour. AMEN

South Australia

Legislative Assembly

Standing Order 39:

On taking the Chair each day, the Speaker shall reads the following prayers:

Almighty God, we humbly beseech you to bless this Parliament and to direct and prosper our deliberations to the advancement of Your Glory and the true welfare of the people of this State.
Followed by the Lord's Prayer.

Legislative Council

Standing Order 51:

The President taking the Chair each day, the President, or the President's delegate, shall read the following prayers:

Almighty God, we humbly beseech Thee to vouchsafe Thy blessing upon this Parliament.
We pray Thee to direct and prosper our deliberations to the advancement of Thy Glory and the true Welfare of the people of this State.
Followed by the Lord's Prayer.

Tasmania

Legislative Assembly

Standing Order 22:

The Speaker shall read the following statement: "I now invite Members to join me in reciting the Lord's Prayer or to stand in silence and pray or reflect on their responsibilities to the people of Tasmania." following which, the Speaker shall recite the following prayers:

Almighty God, we humbly ask You to grant Your blessing upon this Parliament. Lead our deliberations and make them succeed for Your Glory and the true welfare of the people of Tasmania.
Followed by the Lord's Prayer.

Legislative Council

Standing Order 28:

The President will take the Chair and read prayers at the time appointed on every day fixed for the meeting of the Council. The form of the prayers is:

*Almighty God, we humbly beseech Thee to vouchsafe Thy blessing upon this Parliament.
Direct and prosper our deliberations to the advancement of Thy glory and the true welfare of the people of Tasmania.*

Followed by the Lord's Prayer.

Victoria

Legislative Assembly

The standing orders of the Legislative Assembly of Victoria do not formally incorporate prayers as an item of business, however, references are made to the ending of 'the Prayer' before recordings or question time (on a Tuesday) may commence. See Standing Orders 55(1)(a) & 232(4)(e)(v). The Legislative Assembly passed a resolution on 4 October 1928 that "the Speaker, on taking the Chair each day, should read the Lord's Prayer." On 9 October 1928, for the first time, the gathering of the Legislative Assembly commenced with the Speaker taking the Chair and reading the prayer.

Legislative Council

Standing Order 4.02:

The President shall take the Chair as soon after the time appointed for the meeting of the Council as a quorum of Members is present, and shall read the Lord's Prayer.

Western Australia

Legislative Assembly

Standing Order 20:

The Speaker shall say an Acknowledgement of Country to commence proceedings and will then say prayers.

Standing Order 58:

The form of the prayers is as follows:

Almighty God we humbly beseech Thee to vouchsafe Thy special blessing upon this Parliament now assembled, and that Thou wouldst be pleased to direct and prosper all our consultations to the advancement of Thy glory and the true welfare of the people of Western Australia.

Followed by the Lord's Prayer.

Legislative Council

Standing Order 14:

At the commencement of each sitting day, the President reads two prayers; the Legislative Council prayer and the Lord's Prayer. The following form of the prayer was adopted by the Legislative Council on 3 December 2015:

Almighty God, creator of the universe, giver of life, who has ordained that we should live as social beings, seeking the fulfilment of our own true purpose within our society; bless this Legislative Council now assembled to deliberate upon the affairs affecting the well-being and good order of society in Western Australia; that all members give honour, wisdom and integrity to the role for which they have been chosen, and the decisions and decorum of this Council be always to the advancement of Thy glory, the honour of Her Majesty and the continued benefit of the people of this State. Amen.

Followed by the Lord's Prayer.

Northern Territory

Legislative Assembly

Sessional Order 6:

Prayers and an Acknowledgement of Country are conducted by the Speaker or a nominee at the commencement of each day. The prayers are:

Almighty God we humbly beseech thee to vouchsafe thy blessing upon this Assembly. Direct and prosper our deliberations to the advancement of thy glory and the true welfare of the people of the Northern Territory.

Followed by the Lord's Prayer.

Australian Capital Territory

Legislative Assembly

Standing Order 30:

The Speaker takes the Chair at the Commencement of each sitting, with a quorum of Members being present, and asks Members to stand in silence and pray or reflect on their responsibilities to the people of the ACT.

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This is the first occasional paper to be published by the PM Glynn Institute, Australian Catholic University's public policy think-tank. It has been developed as part of the Institute's Hope and Confidence work stream, which aims to develop well-supported, practical and achievable proposals for strengthening hope and renewing confidence in Australian public life.

Cover image

Vida Pearson, *Kerman Carpet* 1988 (detail).

Linocut, hand-coloured in watercolour and printed on Magnani paper.

Australian Catholic University Art Collection.

Cover design

Christina Fedrigo

