

Religion, Faith and Spirituality in the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia

This article aims to further a conversation about the role of religion, faith, and spirituality in public institutions in Canada by examining the practice of prayer in the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. The authors provide a background of prayer in the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, an overview of the differing customs in provincial and territorial legislative assemblies in Canada, and also public controversies and court cases which have arisen in response to these conventions. Following an analysis of prayers delivered at the opening of legislative sessions of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia from 1992 to 2016, the article concludes by comparing the content of prayers delivered to self-reported rates of religiosity, spirituality, and faith amongst the general British Columbia population.

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Introduction

Contemporary Canada is largely conceived of as a secular society; yet some historic religious elements remain entrenched in Canadian democratic institutions, including the practice of prayer in provincial legislatures. This article aims to further a conversation about the role of religion, faith, and spirituality in public institutions in Canada by examining the practice of prayer in the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. We provide a background of prayer in the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, an overview of the differing customs in provincial and territorial legislative assemblies in Canada, and also public controversies and court cases which have arisen in response to these conventions. Following an analysis of prayers delivered at the opening of legislative sessions of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia from 1992 to 2016, the article concludes by comparing the content of

prayers delivered to self-reported rates of religiosity, spirituality, and faith amongst the general British Columbia population. By examining these opening prayers, we hope to illuminate the representation of different religions within the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. It is important to note that due to data limitations, this examination will be a “snapshot” of faith-based conventions in the Legislature Assembly of British Columbia, rather than a comprehensive analysis of how different faith groups are represented in practice.

Building on existing literature about religion in Canadian legislatures, particularly Martin Lanouette’s 2009 article¹ for the *Canadian Parliamentary Review* which compared legislature prayer at the national level in Commonwealth countries and the United States of America, we provide an interprovincial overview with a special focus on the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. We hope it will also supplement research conducted by Ontario Legislative Intern Christiana Fizet in 2009 about the use of the Lord’s Prayer in the Ontario Legislature,² and a 2014 report presented by Rosalie Jukier and José Woehrling to the XVIIIth International Congress of Comparative Law about the role of faith in Canadian law, society, and public institutions.³

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History and Practice of Legislative Prayer

The practice of legislative prayer began around 1558 in the United Kingdom, when the early British Parliament met within a church.⁴ This practice has been imitated in Canadian legislatures – a legacy of their British parliamentary origins.⁵ In British Columbia, before the beginning of daily proceedings, the routine business of the Legislative Assembly includes an interdenominational prayer provided by a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA).⁶ The reading of a prayer also occurs prior to the Speech from the Throne, a practice that marks the opening of a new legislative session by outlining the government's legislative priorities for that session. This prayer is delivered by a representative of a faith group rather than an MLA. An invitation to deliver this opening prayer is facilitated through the Office of the Speaker, who may also assist the Office of the Premier when that office has expressed an interest in inviting someone to deliver the prayer. It has become practice to invite representatives of different faith groups on a rotating basis. MLAs may also make suggestions to the Office of the Speaker about whom to invite to deliver the prayer, though ultimately the Office of the Speaker makes the necessary arrangements.

Across Canada and within other Commonwealth countries, prayers were traditionally seen as a private practice for the benefit of the elected members of each respective legislature and, therefore, not necessarily recorded as part of Hansard, the transcript of legislative proceedings. The Parliament of Britain does not transcribe prayers, and even prohibits the public from entering the public gallery until after the prayer has been completed.⁷ In the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, prayers delivered prior to the Speech from the Throne were not initially transcribed when a Hansard was first implemented in 1972. These opening prayers have been transcribed from 2001 onward, while daily prayers delivered by MLAs have never been entered into the written record.⁸ Audio visual broadcasting of the proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia began in 1991, and both daily prayers and prayers delivered prior to the Speech from the Throne have been recorded and publicly broadcast since.⁹

The Canadian Comparative Perspective

Practices related to prayer vary widely across the legislative assemblies of Canada's provinces and territories. The legislatures of Newfoundland and Labrador and Québec do not recite any form of

opening prayer. The Newfoundland and Labrador House of Assembly has never opened its proceedings with a prayer. The National Assembly of Québec (Assemblée nationale du Québec) ended the practice of prayer in 1976, opting instead for a moment of quiet reflection. The provinces of Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick and Ontario continue to recite the Lord's Prayer before daily House proceedings, while Nova Scotia uses a shortened form of the traditional prayer.¹⁰ In Ontario, after the recitation of the Lord's Prayer, the Speaker chooses from a rotating list of other prayers reflecting Indigenous, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Baha'i and Sikh faiths – a change which was introduced in 2008 after a contentious public debate.¹¹ All other provinces and territories have opted to use a non-denominational prayer, although each legislative assembly approaches this practice in a different manner. For example, British Columbia and Nunavut allow an MLA to deliver a prayer of their choice prior to House proceedings, while Alberta, Manitoba, the Yukon, the Northwest Territories¹² and Saskatchewan¹³ use set non-denominational prayers.

Recent Public Controversy & Legal Action

Prayer in political assemblies has been the subject of considerable controversy in Canada in recent years. In 2008, Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty proposed an all-party committee to examine the role of the Lord's Prayer in the Ontario Legislative Assembly. A public outcry about a proposal to stop reciting the Lord's Prayer ensued, with more than 25,000 petitions from the public submitted to the all-party committee that was tasked with review of the prayer. The Legislative Assembly ultimately decided to recite the Lord's Prayer in addition to a prayer from the rotating list from different faiths, as well as adding a moment of silence.¹⁴ In Saskatchewan, a petition calling for an end to the practice of daily prayers in the Saskatchewan Legislative Assembly was presented. The petition also called for the Premier to end his practice of delivering an annual Christmas message, or to make the message religiously neutral. The Premier of Saskatchewan responded by saying that both practices would continue while he remained in office.¹⁵

Controversy about the practice of opening public proceedings with a prayer reached the Supreme Court of Canada with the case of *Mouvement laïque québécois v. Saguenay (City)*, 2015. The case was initiated by Alain Simoneau, an atheist, and the Mouvement laïque Québécois, a secular-rights organization, against the city of Saguenay and its mayor, Jean Tremblay. In 2011, Québec's human rights tribunal ordered the city

to stop opening municipal council's public meetings with a prayer, as this practice breached the state's duty of neutrality and interfered with Simoneau's freedom of conscience and religion. Tremblay appealed this ruling in the Court of Appeal, which reversed the tribunal's decision on the basis that the prayer could not interfere with Simoneau's rights, as it was non-denominational and fundamentally inclusive.¹⁶ Upon final appeal, the Supreme Court of Canada sided with the tribunal in a unanimous decision, ruling that the recitation of the prayer infringed on Simoneau's freedom of conscience and religion because it was "above else a use by the council of public powers to manifest and profess one religion to the exclusion of all others."¹⁷ The judgment noted that Canadian society has evolved to give rise to a "concept of neutrality" which requires that "the state neither favour nor hinder any particular belief," including non-belief.¹⁸ The Supreme Court's decision was based primarily on the content of the *Québec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms*, however the ruling is applicable to municipalities nationwide. As held in the *Saguenay* case, it is likely that prayers in legislative assemblies are protected by parliamentary privilege and therefore outside of the jurisdiction of the courts.¹⁹ The Court's ruling nonetheless sparked a debate about the role of religion in provincial and territorial legislatures.

Table 1: Breakdown of the opening prayers for each legislative session by religious affiliation from 1992 to 2016.

Religion	Number of Prayers	Percentage (%)
Muslim	1	3.2
Jewish	2	6.5
Indigenous	3	9.7
Non-denominational	4	12.9
Christian	21	67.7

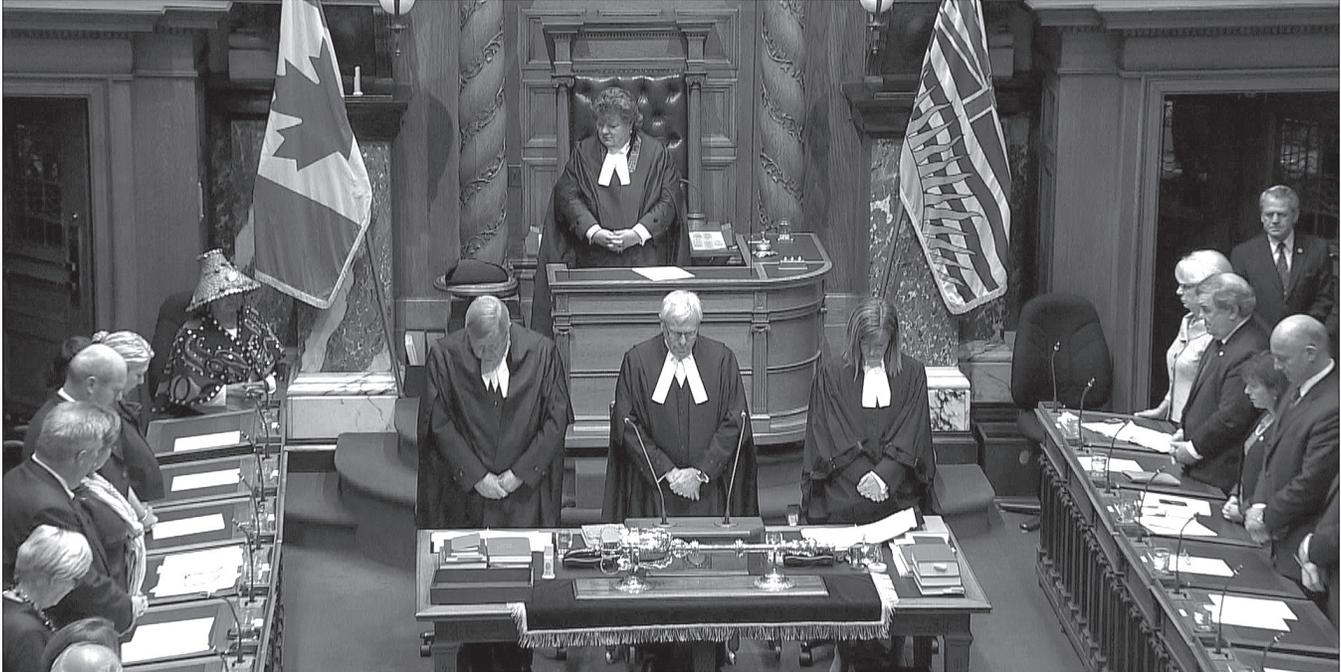
Prayer in British Columbia's Legislature

Recent public controversy about prayer in Canadian legislatures makes study of this practice especially topical. In order to better understand practices of religion and spirituality in the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, we analyzed every prayer delivered at the start of a new legislative session from 1992 to 2016, when Hansard Broadcasting Services began to record them, to date. These prayers, rather than the daily prayers, were chosen as the focus of analysis because daily prayers are not transcribed into Hansard.

To appropriately categorize each prayer, criteria to determine which religion was reflected in a given prayer were established. Prayers categorized as Christian referenced "Jesus", "God", "Father", and other words commonly associated with the Christian faith. The speaker of the prayer was also taken into consideration, as a Christian prayer would often be delivered by a representative from a Christian church, such as a pastor or reverend. Prayers delivered by representatives of other religions, faiths, and groups, such as Imams, Rabbis, and First Nation Elders, were analyzed for keywords typically associated with their positions in order to confirm evidence of such a link. Prayers coded as non-denominational were delivered by individuals unaffiliated with a religious or spiritual organization and ones that did not contain words associated with a specific religion to the exclusion of others. For instance, references to Allah or Lord were coded as relating to Islam or Christianity respectively, although they may both have also referenced the "divine" and "spirituality" and concluded with "amen".

In total, 31 prayers were delivered prior to the opening of session from the first session of the 35th Parliament in 1992 to the fifth session of the 40th Parliament in 2016. Of the 31 prayers delivered in this period, 21 (67.7 per cent) were Christian in nature, four (12.9 per cent) were non-denominational, three (9.7 per cent) were Indigenous, two (6.5 per cent) were Jewish, and one (3.2 per cent) was Muslim. (See Table 1)

All non-denominational prayers included in this study were delivered in the first five years of the sample, from 1992 to 1996. These prayers were delivered by either a military officer or MLA. The non-denominational prayers delivered in 1993 and 1994 by MLAs were identical in wording and the non-denominational prayer offered in 1995 was extremely similar. The years 2000, 2006, and 2014 each had an Indigenous prayer delivered by a member of a local



Opening of the 40th Parliament, 3rd Session prayer given by Margaret Rose George, elder of Tsleil-Waututh First Nation.

First Nation. Jewish prayers were delivered in 2003 and 2013 by local Rabbis, and the 2015 legislative session was opened with a Muslim prayer by a member of the Ismaili Muslim Community of British Columbia.

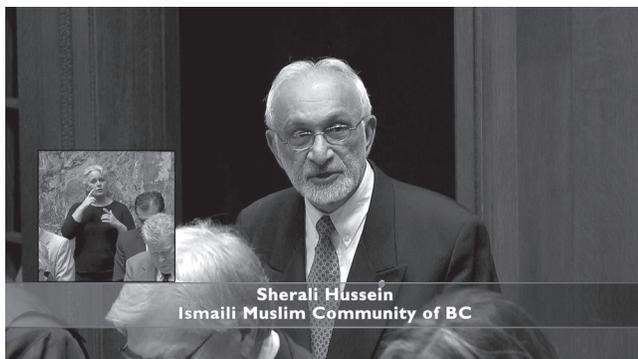
Religion in British Columbian Society

British Columbia is home to individuals with a variety of different religious and spiritual beliefs. The most recent census data on religiosity, collected by Statistics Canada in 2001, reported that 54.9 per cent of British Columbians identified as Christian (including Catholic, Protestant, Christian Orthodox), 3.5 per cent as Sikh, 2.2 per cent as Buddhist, 1.5 per cent as Muslim, 0.8 per cent as Hindu, 0.5 per cent as Jewish, 0.3 per cent as part of an Eastern religion, and 0.4 per cent as part of another religion. In this survey, 35.8 per cent of respondents reported no religious affiliation.²⁰ Although this data is now relatively outdated, 2001 represents a midpoint in the time period examined in this study. It can therefore be used to compare representations of religion in the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia to religiosity in the general population.

The 2011 National Household Survey provides a more current overview of religiosity in British Columbia. Unlike the mandatory census, this was a voluntary

survey that was completed by less than three-quarters of British Columbian households. Among those British Columbians who completed the survey, 44.6 per cent identified as Christian, 44.1 per cent as having no religious affiliation, 4.7 per cent as Sikh, 2.1 per cent as Buddhist, 1.8 per cent as Muslim, 1.1 per cent as Hindu, 0.5 per cent as Jewish, and 0.8 per cent as part of another religion.²¹ Religious affiliations reported in the census and the Household Survey are similar, with the exception of a significant decrease in the number of self-identifying Christians (54.9 per cent in 2001 versus 44.6 per cent in 2011) and a notable increase in the number of individuals identifying as having no religious affiliation (35.8 per cent in 2001 versus 44.1 per cent in 2011). The 2011 National Household Survey situates British Columbia within the national context: The survey found that British Columbia has the fewest Christians per capita of any province or territory and that the percentage of individuals who claim no religious affiliation is approximately 20 per cent higher per capita in British Columbia when compared to the Canadian average.²²

Research conducted by private organizations provides greater insight into those British Columbians who do not identify with an organized religion. A 2014 survey conducted by Insights West found that over a quarter of British Columbians who identified



Opening of the 40th Parliament, 4th Session prayer given by Sherali Hussein of the Ismaili Muslim community of British Columbia with interpreter for the hearing impaired.

as having no religious affiliation still identified as being “very or somewhat spiritual.”²³ A 2013 study by the British Columbia Humanist Association found that although 64.2 per cent of respondents stated “no” when asked if they practice or participate in a particular religion or faith, the majority of these individuals indicated that they do believe in a higher power. While this study had a limited sample size of only 600 respondents, it nonetheless provides valuable nuance to the discussion of religion, faith, and spirituality in British Columbia.²⁴

Conclusions

It appears that in the past 24 years, the faiths that are represented within prayers delivered prior to the Speech from the Throne do not directly correlate to the percentage of British Columbians that identify with each respective faith group. Comparing these prayers to the 2001 census and 2011 Household Survey data, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism have been over-represented, while non-denominational beliefs and spiritualities are underrepresented.

These conclusions about the representation of faith in the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia have a number of important limitations. First, additional prayers are delivered at the opening of each day of a legislative session: These daily prayers, delivered by MLAs, are interdenominational in nature and are another important facet of the practice of faith and spirituality in the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. Second, the small sample size of 31 prayers limits the conclusions that can be drawn from our research. Third, the census data does not report on traditional Indigenous spiritualities and

therefore the conclusions about the representation of these belief systems cannot be drawn. Finally, individuals may hold multiple faiths and belief systems simultaneously or change their beliefs over time: Surveys of religiosity and faith amongst British Columbians do not account for this possibility.

Future research analyzing content of the daily prayers delivered within the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia would be an important supplement to this article. It would also be valuable to analyze how these prayers have changed over time and to compare them to opening prayers. Analysis of prayers delivered in other provincial and territorial legislative assemblies would allow for an interjurisdictional comparison with British Columbia, and content analysis of prayers delivered in municipal assemblies across Canada would also be valuable, especially in light of the *Saguenay* case. This paper has not considered the differing practices in regards to public prayer across faith groups. It is possible that some groups may prefer not to engage in public representation of their faith and future research might consider the impact that different conventions in regards to public representation of faith have on the practice of prayer in legislatures.

This paper has approached the prayer delivered prior to the Speech from the Throne as a public proceeding because the Legislative Assembly is open to spectators in the public galleries while it is delivered, it has been transcribed in the British Columbia Hansard since 2001, and it is broadcasted for public consumption since 1992. Yet prayer within legislatures began as a practice intended to occur privately amongst Members of the Parliament of Britain only. Given that the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia’s practices are based upon the British parliamentary system, the prayer delivered prior to the Speech from the Throne may be viewed as a practice solely for the spiritual benefit of MLAs. Using this view of the practice, future research should analyze how accurately prayers represent the faiths of MLAs, rather than the general public.

Although prayers delivered in the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia prior to the Speech from the Throne do not perfectly represent the religiosity of British Columbian society, this has not been a matter of widespread public contention. Nor has the *Saguenay* case initiated a public dialogue about prayer in public assemblies within British Columbia. Perhaps this is because of the genesis of prayers as a private practice intended for elected

officials only. When asked about the practice of prayer in the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, Premier Christy Clark stated "... the thing in British Columbia is, the prayer is sometimes... a prayer that [is] completely non-religious. Sometimes it does refer to God or Allah or Jehovah, or any of the other names that people use for God."²⁵ Given British Columbia's apparent insulation from controversy seen elsewhere in Canada and the Premier's stated comfort with the current way prayer is practiced, it seems likely that prayer in the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia will continue in its current iteration for the foreseeable future.

Notes

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