



Inter-Parliamentary Union
For democracy. For everyone.

Parliamentary report on religion and belief

Working towards more
peaceful and inclusive societies



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Cover picture: Religious leaders were invited to the New Zealand Parliament after the Christchurch mosque attacks in 2019. The interfaith group includes representatives of the Islamic, Jewish, Buddhist, Sikh, Hindu, Ratana, Catholic, Anglican and Presbyterian faiths and churches. © VNP/Daniela Maoate-Cox

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Foreword by the Secretary General

Religion and belief play a significant role in our States and societies. Over 100 States refer to God in their constitutional or similar instruments, and religion and belief are often present in different branches of government or are interwoven into a State's self-understanding. The right to freedom of religion or belief is enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Parliamentarians have an important role to play in meaningfully engaging with the values and worldviews of their constituents, many of which are influenced by religion or belief. Parliaments must ensure that human rights are upheld, without distinction of any kind. Many religions or beliefs have positions on areas of parliamentary concern, such as marriage and divorce, reproductive rights and freedom of expression, to name a few. In our increasingly globalized world, societies are also becoming more diverse, which has an impact on social cohesion and the values and needs of citizens.

The IPU is committed to working towards more peaceful and inclusive societies and to including religion and belief in this conversation. At the 127th IPU Assembly in Quebec City in 2012, parliaments addressed issues of citizenship, identity and linguistic and cultural diversity in a globalized world. They recognized the importance of balancing respect for diversity with social inclusiveness and cohesion as a means of building trust and as a precondition for progress and prosperity. At the 137th IPU Assembly in St. Petersburg in 2017, IPU Member Parliaments recognized that dialogue with faiths, cultures and ethnicities is essential to peace and cultural pluralism. At the our recent 146th IPU Assembly in Manama, parliaments acknowledged that people, on the basis of their religion or belief, can become targets of different types of intolerance, while they can also be important agents in encouraging collaborative networks promoting dialogue and joint projects in service to the community.

At the IPU, we believe in the central role of parliaments in guaranteeing the rule of law and justice and also in contributing to more inclusive societies. Our strategy encourages parliaments to view themselves as part of broader ecosystems with which they must engage for the promotion of peace, democracy and sustainable development for all.

The present report explores the institutional engagement of parliaments with different aspects of religion and belief. It reviews and assesses parliamentary mechanisms and activities and also highlights how parliaments promote inclusion and engage with religion and belief in a way that reflects different needs, values and parliamentary cultures.

It is a pleasure to introduce this unique report, which invites readers to a meaningful dialogue about religion and belief in the work of national parliaments



Martin Chungong
Secretary General
Inter-Parliamentary Union



Symbols of Christianity, Buddhism, Islam and Judaism: Bible, crucifix, Kippah, Allah monogram and mala © Fred de Noyelle/ Godong/Leemage via AFP

Introduction

This *Parliamentary Report on Religion and Belief* is part of a broader engagement of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the world organization of national parliaments, to promote inclusive and peaceful societies where the rights of all, regardless of religion or belief, are guaranteed and protected.

Parliaments are the guardians of the rule of law, human rights and justice in societies, through their key functions of law-making, oversight, budgeting and representation. Religion and belief constitute an important dimension of the identity, values and decision-making processes of individuals and communities.

An oft-cited study conducted by Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life in 2012 revealed that 84% of people worldwide are religiously affiliated and that this number is increasing. In many societies, religion and belief are not merely matters for personal reflection but are interwoven into the social fabric. Religious organizations have long been important providers of social welfare, education, humanitarian assistance, social justice, and spiritual and moral guidance. Some religions or beliefs also desire to shape their societies, as reflected in the agendas of certain politicians, political parties and governance structures. Religious stakeholders can wield an influence comparable to political actors.

The relevance of religion and belief for parliamentary work was recognized at the 137th IPU Assembly in St. Petersburg in 2017, which valued the contribution of interfaith dialogue for promoting cultural pluralism and recognized that, as representatives of the people, the world's parliaments were committed to strengthening normative processes and legal frameworks aimed at enhancing intercultural and interfaith dialogue. At the 146th IPU Assembly in Manama in 2023, parliaments acknowledged the importance of dialogue, education and awareness-raising as tools for countering different forms of intolerance and fostering inclusion and peaceful coexistence.

Objectives

The report follows a number of aims. It is intended firstly as a tool to facilitate mutual learning. It provides insights into how different parliaments protect and represent religions and beliefs within society through legislation and activities. It also outlines parliamentary engagement with religions and beliefs to promote inclusion, peaceful coexistence and dialogue. The report endeavours to highlight the breadth of parliamentary cultures worldwide and to create awareness of the different facets of religion and belief in many societies and parliaments.

The report is also an invitation to parliaments to scrutinize their own legislation and to bring it in line with international human rights frameworks, as well as to review their own practices to ensure that they are informed by up-to-date demographic data and fulfil their intended mandate. Being informed by different practices of other parliaments could be a valuable tool in this process.

Lastly, the report is an invitation to inter-parliamentary and interfaith dialogue, particularly for promoting and protecting the rule of law and peace and inclusion. Sharing different practices and experiences to better guarantee human rights and fundamental freedoms, or to promote peace, inclusion and the rule of law, is a valuable area of focus for dialogue.

The two parts of the *Parliamentary Report on Religion and Belief*

The report is divided into two parts. Part 1 showcases examples of ways that religion and belief are institutionally present in the life and work of parliaments, such as through:

- Highlighting the relationship of religion or belief to the identity of the State, as outlined in the constitution or basic law, which can be reflected in areas such as legislation, budgetary allocation, selection criteria for certain offices or the allocation of reserved seats.
- Parliamentary committees which consider issues relating to religion and belief, including draft legislation, budgetary allocation and oversight of government.
- Consultation mechanisms to advise parliaments on the conduct of their daily work.
- Parliamentary traditions reflecting the religious identity, values or heritage of broader society, such as through prayers, faith-based oaths of office and dress codes.
- Voluntary cross-party common interest groups which allow parliamentarians to engage with political issues that intersect with religious issues.

- Parliamentary participation in or acknowledgement of faith-based events to promote diversity and inclusion, such as religious celebrations, prayer breakfasts, fellowship networks, days/weeks/months dedicated to different languages, cultures and faiths, and commemorations in relation to crimes targeting religious or belief communities.
- Dialogue with representatives of religions or beliefs around common issues or between parliamentary and non-parliamentary actors around issues with a religious or belief dimension.

Part 2 will consider the individual experiences of parliamentarians engaging with religion and belief in their work with constituents and within parliament.

Sources

The report draws on two key sources: firstly, a survey which was shared with IPU Member Parliaments and Permanent Observer organizations in March 2022 which elicited responses from 53 parliaments and 1 permanent observer organization.¹ Secondly, key informant interviews which were conducted with 55 parliamentarians, parliamentary staff and experts throughout 2022. This report is intended to be a living document that will continue to grow as more parliaments share experiences.

The report also draws on input from the General Debate of the 137th IPU Assembly in St. Petersburg, the workshop on *Good parliamentary practices to promote interfaith dialogue* at the 143rd IPU Assembly in Madrid in 2021, the Global Parliamentary Report 2022, and the IPU's open-data platform (Parline), as well as other open-access literature.

In order to remain consistent in its use of sources, the report uses English language translations of national constitutions and basic laws as found on the Constitute website (constituteproject.org), a platform developed by the Comparative Constitutions Project at the University of Texas in Austin and the University of Chicago, which contains in-force constitutions and basic laws from 193 States. The report uses demographic data found in the annual International Religious Freedom Reports of the US Department of State (US DoS). This report makes use of the 2021 US DoS reports, which were released in June 2022.² The US DoS reports draw on national census data in their demographic estimates where available and are a helpful alternative to solely relying on national sources, which would reduce the reliability of the information across the board.

¹ A list of IPU Member Parliaments can be found at: <https://www.ipu.org/about-ipu/members>.

² This report also uses the terms given by the US Department of State (US DoS) to describe religious traditions.

Limitations of this report

Some areas fall outside the scope of the present report.

Firstly, the report acknowledges that the existence of legislation or activities ostensibly protecting freedom of religion or belief, guaranteeing minority rights and representation, and promoting cultures of peace and inclusion, is not a statement about whether these provisions are being implemented freely or fully. Further, parliamentary practices, such as allocated seats for minorities and quotas, are not always used to uphold the rights of these groups, nor do they always reflect the demographic reality of society.

Secondly, the report focuses mainly on the rights and visibility of religious communities and their members and less on those of people who have no religious affiliation. It is often challenging to define and collect reliable data on those professing no religious affiliation, whose rights are curtailed in a number of societies. At the same time, non-affiliation is on the rise in a number of States: census data from Australia and

the United Kingdom published in 2022 revealed for the first time that the number of people professing a religious affiliation dropped below 50% of the population, while the number of those professing no religious affiliation continues to rise.

Thirdly, religion and belief is also an intersectional issue, closely related to other issues such as gender, youth, citizenship, human rights and minority rights. The IPU supports an inclusive approach, encouraging parliaments to consider issues of religion and belief within the broader context of upholding the rights and freedoms of all groups.

Issues of religion and belief often include an associated value system. At times, values of religion and belief can stand in tension with other rights. Part 2 of this report will consider some of these issues in more detail.

Despite these limitations, the report hopes to be a valuable resource for the global parliamentary community and serve as a stepping stone for dialogue and the exploration of related issues.



Executive summary

The *Parliamentary Report on Religion and Belief* examines how parliaments and parliamentarians engage with issues of religion and belief in their work to build peaceful and inclusive societies. It recognizes that religion and belief constitute an important dimension of the identity, values and decision-making processes of individuals and communities. They can influence how people participate in society, how they exercise their civic and political rights, and how they view their allegiance to the State. Religion and belief are also reflected in political and other governance structures.

Part 1 of the report focuses on different ways in which religion and belief are institutionally integrated into parliamentary activities. Part 2 will engage with the experiences of parliamentarians in approaching issues in which parliamentary work and religion and belief intersect.

The IPU promotes political dialogue for the promotion of peace and cooperation among peoples and for the solid establishment of representative institutions. As the global organization of national parliaments, its work is guided by the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It seeks to better understand the broader systems in which parliaments are embedded. The information and findings in this report therefore aim to contribute to the broader learning of the parliamentary community about the diversity of parliamentary cultures and the unique context of each society, determined by its history, parliamentary system and own blend of religions, beliefs and traditions. It also seeks to identify where religion and belief can promote or hinder the work of parliaments in upholding the rule of law, citizenship, human rights and justice in our societies.

His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople, on his first visit to Lithuania, delivers a speech at a conference in the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania. From left to right: Ingrida Šimonytė, Prime Minister of the Republic of Lithuania; Viktorija Čmilytė-Nielsen, Speaker of the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania; His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople; and the Archbishop Metropolitan of Vilnius Gintaras Grušas. 22 March 2023. © Džoja Gunda Barysaitė, Office of the Seimas

Religion, belief and the legislative system

An important function of parliament is to draft legislation. This has to be consistent with the State's constitution or basic law. In these texts, we variously find articles that designate an official religion or belief, that have provisions for religious rulings in certain areas of law, whose values or principles are religiously influenced, as well as different understandings of secularism and how it relates to religion or belief. A number of constitutions or basic laws contain a reference to religion or belief in the preamble, which creates a link to heritage, origins and recent history.

The majority of constitutions or basic laws also contain statements on how the State approaches religious freedom. Guided by these statements, parliaments are tasked with ironing out the details of how religions or beliefs present within the State are integrated into or protected by the legislative framework of the State, which may be secular and/or influenced by religion or belief.

States vary with regard to how the legislative systems engage with religion and belief. Some States have one set of laws which apply to all members of society, regardless of religion or belief. Others allow for different religions or beliefs to exercise their own laws in certain areas. Exceptions are often made in areas of personal or family law, including marriage, divorce, adoption, inheritance and succession. Still others are guided by the laws of one tradition, within the boundaries of which different religions or beliefs can practise.

Parliamentary committees

Many parliaments have committees in one or both chambers dealing with issues relating to religion and belief. The mandate of these committees is not standardized across parliaments. They can be variously responsible for oversight, legislation and/or consultation on issues relating to the expression of religion and belief, human rights, the rights of religious minorities, compliance with international laws, drafting or reviewing legislation and its implementation, and scrutinizing the behaviour of government. Some parliaments have entire committees dedicated to religion and belief. Others distribute issues impacting religion and belief to committees with overlapping mandates. Work relating to religion and belief can be found in committees dealing with issues such as youth, sports and culture, human rights, justice and governance.

Representing diversity of religion and belief

Parliaments have different tools for promoting the political representation of persons from different religions and beliefs. Some parliaments have reserved seats for certain groups – sometimes including religious or ethno-religious groups – in one or both chambers. The number of reserved seats is often based on early census data. Other parliaments have no regulation here, understanding that the composition of parliament, through directly elected members, will organically reflect the changing face of society.

Consultation mechanisms

A number of parliaments have mechanisms in place that facilitate consultation with stakeholders with expertise and from a spectrum of interest groups in society, including representatives of religions and beliefs. Key ways of consulting with external voices are through inviting experts to committee meetings, inviting representatives of religions or beliefs to parliament, holding public hearings, and inviting written submissions.

When the public is invited to participate in parliamentary processes, religious actors and representatives of beliefs and faith-based organizations can participate in their capacity as members of the public as well as community leaders who influence public opinion.

Parliamentary activities

Parliaments have additional, non-institutional activities centred around religion or belief. Some parliaments have cross-party groups around faith-based issues. These are not parliamentary bodies but rather dialogue mechanisms created by parliamentarians which bring together members across party lines to engage in issues of common interest or concern. Cross-party cooperation can also extend to prayer groups, fellowships or prayer breakfasts, which can be confessional, ecumenical or interfaith in outlook.

Some parliaments participate in religious celebrations by sharing messages of peace and goodwill or by individual members of parliament attending services during religious holidays. Other parliaments respond ad hoc to events that impact society, such as by showing solidarity after acts of violence or discrimination towards a religious or belief community.

Parliamentary attitudes towards religion and belief

Parliaments stand at the nexus between the tradition that the country is steeped in and upon which its institutions were established, and the values of its contemporary citizens. This is often visible in how religion or belief is expressed in parliament.

A number of parliaments begin each session of either one or both chambers with a prayer. For many of these, the prayer has been adapted over the years, having its text altered, being read in different languages or accompanied by a period of silent reflection for those who do not wish to participate. In some instances, there are specific religious clergy assigned to parliament to cater for the spiritual needs of members and to exercise religious functions.

Parliamentary dress codes can evoke debates around religious freedom where provisions exist on certain items of clothing or the wearing of conspicuous religious symbols.

During major religious celebrations or religiously significant events, parliament may choose to adapt its working mode to allow members to participate in observances such as breaking fast or celebrating a religious holiday that does not have public holiday status in the country.

Oaths of office are part of the swearing-in of parliamentarians, required before they are permitted to assume parliamentary duties. A number of oaths are sworn in the name of God. Parliaments have several ways of catering for members of parliament who belong to different religions or who profess no belief. Some parliaments offer the possibility of swearing an affirmation, from which religious references are omitted, instead of an oath. Others offer different religious texts which can be sworn upon.

Regional and international parliamentary engagement

There are a number of inter-parliamentary organizations which work to promote common interests and support parliamentary work. These organizations appeal to shared values of different parliaments, for example by drawing on a common religious heritage and cooperating to preserve it, or bringing parliaments of different religious or belief traditions together on the basis of promoting peace.

Parliaments and parliamentary organizations also engage in dialogue with extra-parliamentary actors. There are instances of parliamentary cooperation with religious actors in the spirit of partnership for common ends, such as on climate change or nuclear non-proliferation.

What next?

It is hoped that this report can open an avenue for experience-based inter- and intra-parliamentary dialogue around the engagement of parliaments with religion and belief to promote more peaceful, just and inclusive societies.

The report is a living document to be enriched as new information is received. As such, we invite parliaments to share further examples of how they engage with religion and belief by contacting us at: postbox@ipu.org.

1. Religion, belief and the legislative system³

1.1. Religious influence and religious heritage

The variety of religions and beliefs worldwide, combined with the uniqueness of parliamentary structures, means that speaking about parliamentary engagement with religion and belief is highly subjective. Constitutions or basic laws often make statements about religion or belief – its exercise or its role within the State – and subsequent legislation must be consistent with these. As parliaments in most cases also decide on amendments to the constitution or basic law, the role of religion in the constitution basic law is therefore also an expression of how parliament understands the State.

According to a 2017 study from the Pew Research Center, of 199 countries analysed, 43 have an official state religion and a further 40 have a preferred religion, while 106 have no official/preferred religion and 10 are actively hostile to religious institutions.⁴

In order to elicit further information about the attitude of the State towards religion and belief and whether it is reflected in its legislature, the IPU asked parliaments whether their legislative system was influenced by the laws or values of religions or beliefs.

In a number of parliaments of Muslim-majority States there exists a connection between Islam being the state religion and a religious legal apparatus, which is often a source of legislation. Islamic traditions have religious laws, called the Sharia, two principal sources of which are the Qur'an and the sayings and practices of the prophet Mohammed, the Sunna. This Sharia is often mentioned in the constitution or basic law:⁵

- Article 227 of the Constitution of Pakistan states, "All existing laws shall be brought in conformity with the Injunctions of Islam as laid down in the Holy Quran and Sunnah, in this part referred to as the Injunctions of Islam, and no law shall be enacted which is repugnant to such Injunctions." A qualification is subsequently added: "In the application of this clause to the personal law of any Muslim sect, the expression 'Quran and Sunnah' shall mean the Quran and Sunnah as interpreted by the sect."⁶

- In Palestine, Article 4.1 of the Basic Law states: "Islam is the official religion in Palestine. Respect for the sanctity of all other divine religions shall be maintained" and Article 4.2 states: "The principles of Islamic Shari'a shall be a principal source of legislation."⁷

In Egypt, there is the unique case of the existence of Al-Azhar, the traditional seat of learning for Sunni Islam. The Egyptian Constitution establishes in Article 1 that the system of the State is based "[...] on citizenship and the rule of law"; and in Article 2 clarifies that "Islam is the religion of the State [...]". The principles of Islamic Sharia are the principle source of legislation.⁸ Article 3 allows for the principles of the laws of Egyptian Christians and Jews to serve as the main source of laws governing their personal status and religious affairs.⁸ In Article 7, Al-Azhar is mentioned as:

"an independent scientific Islamic institution, with exclusive competence over its own affairs. It is the main authority for religious sciences, and Islamic affairs. It is responsible for preaching Islam and disseminating the religious sciences and the Arabic language in Egypt and the world.
[...]"

Al-Azhar's Grand Sheikh is independent and cannot be dismissed."⁹

Al-Azhar claims it is the most authoritative source on religious matters, with reference to the constitution. There is also another body advising on interpretation of Islamic laws: Dar al-Ifta, a religious body formally under the Ministry of Justice, but whose head, or Grand Mufti, is nominated by Al-Azhar via secret ballot. Dar al-Ifta issues religious rulings and fatwas, and provides advice to the government, parliament and broader society on religious matters. The Ministry of Religious Endowments is another source of authority regarding religious matters. It is a governmental body not affiliated with Al-Azhar.

³ An informative document in this regard is the 2018 Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief concerning the relationships between the State and religion and their impact on freedom of religion or belief. See: Shaheed, 2020.

⁴ Pew Research Center, 2017.

⁵ Sharia is not a static code and is mentioned here to indicate its presence in a number of legal texts. An exploration of its process and application is beyond the scope of this report.

⁶ Pakistan 1973 (reinst. 2002, rev. 2018) Constitution.

⁷ Palestine 2003 (rev. 2005) Basic Law.

⁸ Egypt 2014 (rev. 2019) Constitution.

⁹ Ibid.

Case study: Indonesia's "unity in diversity"

Indonesia is the largest Muslim-majority democracy in the world, with 87% of its 275 million-strong population identifying as Muslim. The State officially recognizes six religions confessions: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism.¹⁰ Since 2017, other belief systems including traditional religious groups and minorities have also been recognized on identity cards. There is no official data on people professing no belief. Indonesia is also an ethnically diverse country, with over 1,000 ethnic groups speaking more than 700 languages spread across the 17,000 islands of the Indonesian archipelago.

The State's attitude to religion is not determined by one particular tradition. Rather, Article 29 of the Constitution puts forward monotheism as the guiding religious principle ("The State shall be based upon the belief in the One and Only God"), while in the next sentence guaranteeing freedom of religion or belief (Article 29.2, also 28E and 28I).¹¹ This corresponds with the five principles underlying the Indonesian state philosophy, known as Pancasila.¹² The first of these principles is the acknowledgement of monotheism, making the status of religious non-affiliation unclear.

Indonesia's national motto *bhinneka tunggal ika* – which translates as "unity in diversity" – reflects this hyper-diversity and is enshrined in Article 36A of the Constitution.¹³ It is written on the national coat of arms, alongside the Pancasila eagle.

Various religious practices exist in the country, with some provinces, such as Aceh, enforcing Sharia law.

Parliamentarian Putu Supadma Rudana from Bali, a Hindu-majority Indonesian province, says, "The Indonesian experience reconfirms that religion and democracy can coexist and make a constructive contribution to a more prosperous and peaceful world." Fellow parliamentarian Fadli Zon, of the Muslim-majority West Java province, extends this thought to the work of parliament, saying, "if parliaments can participate in this interfaith dialogue, in the long run we will have more tolerance and understanding about the differences among religious beliefs and that is the source of peace. After all, we are the same."

Craftsmen make a statue of Garuda Pancasila in the Greater Bali area, Kalimantan, East Jakarta. © Dasril Roszandi / NurPhoto / NurPhoto via AFP



¹⁰ US DoS, 2022j.

¹¹ Indonesia 1945 (reinst. 1959, rev. 2002) Constitution.

¹² Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013.

¹³ Indonesia 1945 (reinst. 1959, rev. 2002) Constitution.

In Buddhist-majority States in Asia, some constitutions make reference to or show a preference for Buddhist values and practices. The Constitution of Sri Lanka states that the Republic of Sri Lanka shall “give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana...” (teachings or practices). The Constitution also guarantees freedom of religion or belief. Although Sri Lanka is a Buddhist-majority State (70.2%), it also has significant Hindu, Muslim and Christian populations estimated at 12.6%, 9.7% and 7.4%, respectively.¹⁴

In Thailand, the Constitution obliges the State to “support and protect” Buddhism and other religions. Section 67 states in this regard:

“In supporting and protecting Buddhism, which is the religion observed by the majority of Thai people for a long period of time, the State should promote and support education and dissemination of dharmic principles of Theravada Buddhism for the development of mind and wisdom development, and shall have measures and mechanisms to prevent Buddhism from being undermined in any form. The State should also encourage Buddhists to participate in implementing such measures or mechanisms.”

Data from the 2010 census indicates that 93% of the population is Theravada Buddhist and 5% is Muslim. There are also small populations of animists, Christians, Confucians, Hindus, Jews, Sikhs and Taoists.¹⁵

Cambodia is a predominantly Buddhist State (93% of the population) which recognizes Buddhism as the religion of the State.¹⁶ The State’s motto is “nation, religion, king”. When the King dies, Buddhist religious representatives are included in the Royal Council of the Throne, which selects his successor. The Constitution fosters Buddhist education, encouraging the State to promote Pali schools and Buddhist institutes.¹⁷

Other systems are implicitly influenced by religion or belief. For instance, the 1987 Political Constitution of the Republic of Nicaragua, under Title I. Fundamental Principles, Article No. 5, states that “Christian values” are amongst the principles of the nation. The third paragraph states: “Christian values ensure brotherly love, the reconciliation between the members of the Nicaraguan family, the respect for individual diversity without any discrimination, the respect for and equal rights of persons with disabilities, and the preference for the poor.”¹⁸ This statement does not attach itself to a specific religious law or statement, but rather intends to summarize its essence.

Religious heritage

A number of constitutions make reference to the religious heritage of the State. In the Constitution of Bhutan, Article No. 3.1 states: “Buddhism is the spiritual heritage of Bhutan, which promotes the principles and values of peace, non-violence, compassion and tolerance.”¹⁹

An amendment to the Constitution of the Russian Federation from March 2020 also has recourse to religious heritage. Article 67-1.2 states: “The Russian Federation, united by a thousand-year history, preserving the memory of ancestors who conveyed the ideals and faith in God to us, as well as continuity in the development of the Russian State, recognizes the historically formed state unity.”²⁰ This amendment has been commented on by the Constitutional Court as still being consistent with the secular nature of the Russian State:

“The reference in the text of the Constitution of the Russian Federation to faith in God conveyed to the people of Russia by their ancestors does not mean a rejection of the secular nature of the Russian State, since the texting is not associated with any confessional affiliation ... and it is intended only to emphasize the need to give due regard, when implementing the state policy, to the historically significant social and cultural role that the religious component played in the formation and development of the Russian statehood.”²¹

A feature of the Russian State is that it also has seven Muslim-majority republics and one Buddhist-majority region. Kalmykia is the only Buddhist-majority region in Europe.

A number of other constitutions acknowledge the State’s religious heritage in their preamble.

- For instance, the preamble of the Constitution of Poland states: “Beholden to our ancestors [...] for our culture rooted in the Christian heritage of the Nation and in universal human values.”²²
- The preamble of the Constitution of Hungary states: “We are proud that our king Saint Stephen built the Hungarian State on solid ground and made our country a part of Christian Europe one thousand years ago. [...] We recognise the role of Christianity in preserving nationhood. We value the various religious traditions of our country.”²³
- The preamble to the Constitution of Algeria includes Islam as one of the “fundamental constituents of [Algeria’s] identity.”²⁴

14 US DoS, 2022v.

15 US DoS, 2022w.

16 US DoS, 2022d.; Cambodia 1993 (rev. 2008) Constitution, Article 43.

17 Cambodia 1993 (rev. 2008) Constitution.

18 Nicaragua 1987 (rev. 2014) Constitution.

19 Bhutan 2008 Constitution.

20 Russian Federation 1993 (rev. 2020) Constitution. The new amendments are available in the original Russian but have not yet been updated on the Constitute website. The English translation of the quotation is provided by the Russian Parliament. The US DoS 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Russia also refers to this.

21 Ibid.

22 Poland 1997 (rev. 2009) Constitution.

23 Hungary 2011 (rev. 2016) Constitution.

24 Algeria 2020 Constitution.

- The preamble to the Constitution of Argentina invokes the “protection of God, source of all reason and justice.”²⁵
- The preamble to the Constitution of Timor-Leste gives special mention to the Catholic Church, although the Constitution itself clearly states that religion and the State are separate. The preamble reads: “In its cultural and humane perspective, the Catholic Church in East Timor has always been able to take on the suffering of all the People with dignity, placing itself on their side in the defence of their most elementary rights.”²⁶
- The reason for this mention was to recognize the Catholic Church’s support in Timor-Leste’s path to independence, both under the Portuguese colonial mandate and subsequently during the annexation by Indonesia, until independence in 2002.²⁷

In the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the issue of ethno-religious identity is also mentioned in the preamble. Part of the preamble refers to international declarations which have inspired the Constitution, including: “the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, as well as other human rights instruments.” The preamble also mentions “Bosniacs, Croats, and Serbs, as constituent peoples (along with Others).”²⁸ Generally speaking, the Croats predominantly identify as Roman Catholic, the Bosniacs as Muslim and the Serbs as Serbian Orthodox. The Presidency is occupied by a three-member body, consisting of a Bosniac, Serb and Croat representative. Article IV of the Constitution guarantees representation of all three ethno-religious communities in the upper chamber (the House of Peoples) of the Parliamentary Assembly.

1.2. Legislation regulating religious practice

In addition to giving insight into the position of the State vis-à-vis religion or belief, the constitution or basic law also contains statements on how the State approaches religious freedom. According to data from the Constitute website, an open-access resource which contains English translations of current constitutions and basic laws of 193 States, 184 (or 95% of) States contain provisions on freedom of religion.²⁹ The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life states that 76% of the 198 States and territories that participated in its 2009 study on *Global restrictions on religion* established freedom of religion or belief in their constitutions or basic laws and 20% protect some religious practices.³⁰ This statistic indicates that almost all constitutions/basic laws wholly or partly guarantee religious freedom.

A central function of parliament is drafting and/or reviewing legislation. Guided by the constitution or basic law, parliaments are tasked with ironing out the details of how religions or belief systems present within the State – along with the laws, rituals and structures specific to each tradition – are integrated into or protected by the legislative framework of the State, which can be secular and/or influenced by religions, beliefs and values. This includes where different aspects of freedom of religion or belief require clarifying legislation or where any issue at the national level threatens the rights of citizens on the basis of religion or belief.

Parliaments worldwide have varying approaches to legislation on issues related to religion and belief. Some examples of this include:

- Legislation allowing certain areas of law, such as personal or family law governing marriage, divorce, adoption and/or succession, to be regulated by religious communities. This point is expanded on below.
- Legislation requiring all citizens, regardless of their world view, to follow the same set of laws. In Belgium, for instance, all marriages must be conducted by a registrar and a religious ceremony is optional.³¹
- Legislation that subsumes religious rights, usually of minorities, under those of the official or majority religion. The Constitution of Afghanistan of 2004 states that Islam is the religion of the State (Articles 1 and 2), laws shall not contravene the tenets of Islam (Article 3) and “followers of other faiths shall be free within the bounds of law in the exercise and performance of their religious rituals” (Article 2).³²
- Legislation which restricts certain practices. In Slovenia, the slaughter of animals without pre-stunning has been banned since 2012 on the grounds of animal welfare. As this violates the conditions needed to guarantee Jewish ritual slaughter, Jewish communities observing Kashrut – the set of laws regulating what Jews are allowed to eat – have to import their meat from other countries.³³
- Legislation in which freedom of religion or belief is restricted by state-approved religions and practices. In China, the Constitution provides for freedom of religious belief (Article 36). It protects the “normal religious activities” of officially recognized religions which do not “disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the state.”³⁴ A number of countries apply limitations to religious freedom.³⁵
- Legislation banning religious communities. According to Pew Research Center data from 2019, 41 countries banned certain religious groups, among them Jehovah’s Witnesses, Baha’is and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community.³⁶

25 Argentina 1853 (reinst. 1983, rev. 1994) Constitution.

26 Timor-Leste 2002 Constitution.

27 US DoS, 2022x.

28 Bosnia and Herzegovina 1995 (rev. 2009) Constitution.

29 Constitute, 2022.

30 Pew Research Center, 2009.

31 Belgium, Civil Code, Article 166.

32 Afghanistan 2004 Constitution.

33 Udin, 2020.

34 China (People’s Republic of) 1982 (rev. 2018) Constitution.

35 Majumdar, 2021.

36 Ibid.

Each parliament is tasked with scrutinizing its own legislation and frameworks regarding religion and belief, as well as the work of government regarding religious freedom and the treatment of different communities, and with using its mechanisms to bring legislation in line with the international human rights frameworks.

1.3. Different laws for different communities

Parliaments were asked whether their legislative system allowed for different religions or beliefs to exercise their own laws in certain areas. Positive responses were received from secular and non-secular States. Exceptions were often made in areas of personal law, including marriage, divorce, adoption, inheritance and succession. In many States, additional efforts are required to ensure the effective implementation of existing legislation.

The Republic of Bangladesh is a multi-religious society with a Muslim-majority population and a significant Hindu minority, as well as smaller Buddhist and Christian communities. According to census data from 2013, a total of 89% of the population identifies as Muslim (Sunni) and 10% as Hindu. The next biggest communities are Roman Catholic and Theravada-Hinayana Buddhist.³⁷ Bangladesh has a secular constitution³⁸ which, while designating a state religion (Islam), guarantees freedom of religion or belief and includes provisions for religious communities to practise their own religion. Its Constitution states in Article 2A: “The state religion of the Republic is Islam, but the State shall ensure equal status and equal right in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and other religions.”³⁹ Article 12 of the Constitution says that it follows the principles of secularism vis-à-vis religion by “the elimination of: (a) communalism in all its forms; (b) the granting by the State of political status in favour of any religion; (c) the abuse of religion for political purposes; (d) any discrimination against, or persecution of, persons practicing a particular religion.”⁴⁰ The legislative system of Bangladesh does not interfere in the exercise of the laws of different religions – within the bounds of the law, morality and public order – but it does codify them. The Succession Act of 1925 covers issues relating to inheritance for different religious groups, as does the Hindu Law of Inheritance (Amendment) Act.

There are acts covering marriage and divorce for different religions, for instance the Parsi Marriage and Divorce Act, Christian Marriage Act, Divorce Act, Hindu Marriage Registration Act, Hindu Married Women's Right to Separate Residence and Maintenance Act, Muslim Family Laws Ordinance and Muslim Marriages and Divorces (Registration) Act. The Special Marriage Act exists for those who do not belong to one of the codified religious traditions or for interfaith marriages.

The Indian Constitution and legislative system exhibits similarities. India is a Hindu-majority country – about 79.8% according to 2011 census data – with many religious minorities, including Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, Baha'i and Jewish. The largest minority is Islam, constituting about 14% of the population.⁴¹ Due to the sheer size of India, minorities can still constitute significant communities. For instance, there are close to 200 million Muslims in India. There are also regions where minority communities – Sikh, Christian and Muslim – constitute the majority of the population.⁴² The Indian legislative system reflects the right to freedom of religion or belief, as granted by the Indian Constitution in Article 25.1.⁴³ It allows people of different religious groups to follow their respective religious values, beliefs and traditions in matters of marriage, divorce, adoption and inheritance. Hindu Code Bills regulate Hindu personal law and also govern the personal law of the Jain, Sikh and Buddhist communities. Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Parsi communities have their own regulations for personal law.

Lebanon has always been a country of high religious diversity, especially within Christian and Muslim communities. Its last census took place in 1932, the results of which led to the recognition of initially 17 religious communities: 5 Muslim groups (including the Druze), Judaism and 11 Christian groups.⁴⁴ Resolution No. 60 L.R. of 1936 on the *Adoption of the system of religious sects* allowed for personal status laws for recognized sects in Lebanon to be developed in accordance with the provisions of different religious systems. Lebanon has 15 personal-status laws and courts. In parliament, laws and regulations imposed by the personal status of the sects are taken into consideration during the discussion, elaboration or adoption of new laws. Data from the Statistics Lebanon organization estimates that today 65% of the population is Muslim (with 32% Sunni, 31.3% Shia and 1.6% Alawite and Ismaili). It approximates the Christian population to be at 32%, with Maronite Catholics comprising 52.5% of the Christian population and Greek Orthodox about 25%.⁴⁵

37 US DoS, 2022a. The report states that there are small groups of Shia Muslims, Ahmadi Muslims, Baha'is, agnostics, atheists and animists.

38 Bangladesh 1972 (reinst. 1986, rev. 2014) Constitution, preamble, Article 8 and Article 12.

39 Bangladesh 1972 (reinst. 1986, rev. 2014) Constitution.

40 Ibid.

41 US DoS, 2022i.

42 Kramer, 2021.

43 India 1949 (rev. 2016) Constitution.

44 The Coptic Orthodox Church was also officially recognized as a Christian group in 1995, making it the 18th religious community recognized in Lebanon.

45 US DoS, 2022o.

2. Parliamentary committees

Many parliaments have committees dealing with issues relating to religion and belief, which exist under different names. The mandate of these committees is not standardized across parliaments. They can be variously responsible for oversight, legislation and/or consultation on issues relating to the expression of religion and belief, human rights, the rights of religious minorities, compliance with international laws, drafting or reviewing legislation and its implementation, and scrutinizing the behaviour of government.

A few examples shared by member parliaments are included in the following.

Both chambers of the Parliament of Argentina have committees dealing with religious affairs: the Unicameral Committee for Foreign Affairs and Worship within the Senate, and the Commission on Foreign Relations and Worship within the Chamber of Deputies. Their mandates include ruling on matters related to the exercise of worship by churches established in the Republic, admission of new religious orders, and other matters relating to worship.⁴⁶

The Parliament of Bangladesh has a Standing Committee on Parliamentary Religious Affairs. The function of a parliamentary standing committee, as outlined in Rule of Procedure 248 of the Bangladesh Parliament, is to “examine any Bill or other matter referred to it by Parliament, to review the works relating to a Ministry which falls within its jurisdiction, to inquire into any activity or irregularity and serious complaint in respect of the Ministry and to examine, if it deems fit, any such other matter as may fall within its jurisdiction and to make recommendations.”⁴⁷

The Parliament of Denmark has an Ecclesiastical Affairs Committee which addresses any issue related to church policies including the Danish Church, other denominations and burial services. The committee’s mandate is the handling of bills and motions within its remit and parliamentary scrutiny of how the government addresses ecclesiastical policy and observes laws and mandates relating to ecclesiastical affairs. Scrutiny is exercised through the standing committee members tabling questions to the Minister for Ecclesiastical Affairs.

The Parliament of Ghana has a Committee on Youth, Sports and Culture. The committee’s mandate is to investigate and report to parliament on issues concerning youth, sports and culture, generally including matters relating to religion and interfaith harmony. The committee is also responsible for parliamentary oversight of the ministries, departments and agencies handling religious issues.

The Parliament of Hungary has a Parliamentary Committee on Justice. One of its responsibilities is to address questions concerning religious affairs. It handles constitutional and legal affairs along with human rights and religious questions, civil affairs and legislation relating to public administration and local governments.

The Parliament of India has a Parliamentary Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment which directly oversees the functioning of the Ministry of Minority Affairs of the Government of India. Furthermore, the National Commission for Minorities in India, which was established through the National Commission for Minorities Act of 1992, deals with six religious communities (Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, Zoroastrians (Parsis) and Jains). It monitors their progress and the effective implementation of safeguards for the protection of the interests of minorities.

The Parliament of Montenegro has a Standing Committee on Human Rights and Freedoms. Its mandate is outlined in Article 44 of the parliament’s Rules of Procedure and includes scrutinizing legislative proposals, regulations and issues relating to individual freedoms and rights, with a special focus on minority rights and implementing ratified international agreements relating to the realization of these rights. It further considers initiatives with the goal of helping implement citizens’ rights and monitors different initiatives aimed at promoting equality. The committee monitors and evaluates the compliance and implementation of Montenegro’s laws with European legislation. The committee has discussed the Draft Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Legal Position of Religious Communities, as well as the Draft Law on Amendments to these.⁴⁸

The Parliament of Nicaragua has a Commission for Peace, Defence, Government and Human Rights. Within the mandate of this commission lies the protection of human rights, especially of vulnerable individuals. There is also a Commission for the Affairs of Native Peoples, Afro-descendants and Autonomous Regimes. The mandate of this commission includes protecting the livelihoods, interests, customs and traditions of the native populations and Afro-descendants.

The Parliament of Pakistan has a Standing Committee on Religious Affairs and Inter-Faith Harmony whose function is to oversee matters relating to religion and belief and to make recommendations to the government.

The upper chamber (Federation Council) of the Parliament of Russia has a Committee on Constitutional Legislation and State Building which is responsible for religious organizations. It also has a permanent advisory body, the Council on Interethnic Relations and Interaction with Religious Associations. Along with government representatives, its members include religious leaders, subject matter experts and civil society organizations.

⁴⁶ Argentina Chamber of Deputies, 2022; Argentina Senate, 2022.

⁴⁷ Bangladesh Parliament, 2007.

⁴⁸ Parliament of Montenegro, 2017.

The Parliament of Rwanda has a Standing Committee on Political Affairs and Governance. One of its responsibilities is to monitor the organization and functioning of faith-based organizations through the Rwanda Governance Board.

The Parliament of Switzerland has Political Institutions Committees within the two chambers. The committees' main task is to examine the bills assigned to them before the councils (plenaries) debate them. The committees make recommendations to the plenary and are also tasked with observing developments in the assigned areas and preparing responses to them. One of their responsibilities is to deal with issues relating to religion. Most matters relating to religion are, however, dealt with at the local or cantonal level.

The Parliament of Thailand has a House of Representatives Standing Committee on Religions, Arts and Culture. The committee's mandate is to oversee issues pertaining to the patronage, preservation and protection of religions and cultural and historical sites, and the conservation and promotion of local arts, tradition and culture. In addition, there is a Senate Standing Committee on Religions, Morals, Ethics, Arts and Culture. This committee considers bills and investigates matters concerning religions, such as the patronage and protection of religions, the conservation of local cultures and wisdom, and the promotion of morals, virtues and ethics, Thai culture, and identity. The committee also has the mandate to monitor and make recommendations about national reform and master plans of the national strategy.

The Parliament of the United Kingdom has a Committee on Human Rights and a statutory Ecclesiastical Committee. Both are joint committees. The Committee on Human Rights examines matters relating to human rights within the United Kingdom, including freedom of religion or belief. It considers government bills for their compatibility with human rights standards and "scrutinises the Government's response to court judgments concerning human rights, and the UK's compliance with its human rights obligations contained in a range of international treaties."⁴⁹ The Ecclesiastical Committee's mandate is to examine draft measures which have been submitted by the Legislative Committee of the General Synod of the Church of England.⁵⁰ Both committees consist of members who have been appointed from the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

The Constitution of Guyana stipulates the requirement to have an Ethnic Relations Commission. The commission comprises representatives of religious bodies, the labour movement, the private sector, youth and women. Nominated members require a two-thirds majority of parliament to be selected. One of the mandates of this committee is to "encourage and create respect for religious, cultural and other forms of diversity in a plural society."⁵¹ It organizes activities to promote social cohesion, reviews legislation, makes recommendations to the National Assembly and investigates allegations of discrimination. It submits a yearly report to the Speaker of the National Assembly on its activities as well as ad hoc reports on matters of importance.⁵²



A seminar for parliamentary staff on interfaith dialogue, featuring panellists representing Buddhism, Islam and Christianity (March 2022). © Parliament of Thailand

49 UK Parliament, 2022c.

50 UK Parliament, 2022d.

51 Guyana 1980 (rev. 2016) Constitution, Article 212 D (f).

52 Guyana 1980 (rev. 2016) Constitution, Articles 212 A–212 F.

Case study: Human rights committees of the Parliament of Romania

Romania is a religiously plural country with high ethnic diversity. According to provisional data from the 2022 census, the majority confessions in Romania are Eastern Orthodox Christianity belonging to the Romanian Orthodox Church (85.3%) and Roman Catholicism (4.5%).⁵³ There are also small numbers of Greek Catholics and other Christian denominations, as well as non-Christian religions. Less than 1% of the population is not affiliated with a religion or belief.⁵⁴ Romania has 20 recognized ethnic-minority communities, and these fall within the mandate of the committees. Six per cent of the population is Hungarian and 3.4% is Roma (though unofficial data gives a higher number for the Roma population). Other groups include Ukrainians, Germans, Turks, Lipovan Russians, Tartars, Serbs, Slovaks, Bulgarians, Croats, Italians, Jews (variously recognized as a religious or ethnic community), Poles, Greeks, Czechs, Armenians, North Macedonians, Ruthenians and Albanians.⁵⁵

The Parliament of Romania has a Committee for Human Rights, Cults and National Minorities Issues in the Chamber of Deputies and a Committee for Human Rights, Equal Opportunities, Cults and Minorities in the Senate.

The Chamber of Deputies committee is responsible for legislating on human and citizens' rights, minority issues, freedom of conscience, the problems of religious cults and freedom of expression through other means than the press.⁵⁶ The committee can invite interested persons, representatives of non-governmental organizations and specialists from public authorities, professional bodies or other specialized institutions to participate in its work. The invited external participants can, upon request, present their opinions on issues discussed in the committee or can provide to the chair of the committee documentation related to the topic under discussion.

The Senate committee has the following main tasks:

- a. It examines, with a view to adopting reports or opinions, draft laws and legislative proposals concerning human rights, national minorities, religious cults and the equality of chances and treatment between men and women.
- b. It requests reports, information and documents from public authorities, conducts inquiries at the request of the Senate's Standing Bureau and reports back to the Standing Bureau.

- c. It oversees the observance by ministries and other public administration bodies, in their respective fields of activity, of human rights and the rights of national minorities and religious cults, as well as the observance of equal opportunities and the equal treatment of men and women.
- d. It invites specialists and representatives of public authorities to its debates.
- e. It may hold joint meetings together with other parliamentary committees, with a view to drafting a joint report.
- f. It may initiate parliamentary inquiries, within the limits and according to the terms set out in the Senate's standing orders.
- g. It decides on the modalities of solving the petitions referred to the committee by the Standing Bureau or those addressed directly to the committee for examination.
- h. It conducts hearings of the candidates for the position of minister with responsibilities in the fields of human rights, equal opportunities, cults and national minorities, together with the corresponding committee of the Chamber of Deputies or other standing committees of the Senate or Chamber of Deputies.
- i. It draws up and submits to the Senate, for debate and adoption, reports on the nominations, confirmations or opinions for the positions for which, according to the Constitution and the law, the appointments are made by the Senate.

The draft legislation examined by the Senate committee, relating to religion and belief, aims at:

- Eliminating all forms of discrimination based on sex, race, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, social category, beliefs, sexual orientation, culture, economic and social status, marital status, or disabilities.
- Eliminating all forms of discrimination whose objective or consequence is the restriction or removal of fundamental human rights and liberties or other rights recognized by law in the political, economic, social, cultural or other fields.

Traditionally, both committees have been chaired by a parliamentarian from one of the minority communities. This allows the minority members of parliament to exert an influence over the work of the committee.⁵⁷

⁵³ Romania National Institute of Statistics, 2022.

⁵⁴ US DoS, 2022r.

⁵⁵ Minority Rights Group International, 2020; Romania National Institute of Statistics, 2022.

⁵⁶ Romania Camera Deputatilor, 2022.

⁵⁷ IPU and UNDP, 2010.

3. Representation: Reserved seats

Parliaments were asked to share examples of practices promoting the political representation of persons from different religions and beliefs. This builds on previous IPU publications about minority and indigenous representation in parliament.⁵⁸

Parline, the IPU platform which provides open access to data on national parliaments, contains data from 61 parliaments which have reserved seats for certain groups in parliament in one or both chambers.⁵⁹ This data encompasses a variety of categories where seats have been reserved for certain groups. Such categories include gender, ethnicity and religion. Below are a few examples of how parliaments ensure the political representation of persons from different religions and beliefs.

In the National Assembly of the Parliament of Pakistan, 10 seats (out of 342) are reserved for non-Muslims. In the Senate, 4 seats (out of 100) are reserved for non-Muslims.⁶⁰ According to the 2017 census, 96% of the population of Pakistan is Muslim (Sunni or Shia) and the remaining 4% comprises more than 10 different religious groups.⁶¹

The Parliament of the Islamic Republic of Iran has 5 reserved seats (out of 290) for the different ethno-religious communities recognized by the Constitution, including 1 seat for Zoroastrians, 1 seat for Jews, 1 seat for Assyrian and Chaldean Christians and 2 seats for Armenian Christians.⁶² According to data from the Iranian Government, 99.4% of the population is Muslim – about 90–95% is Shia and 5–10% is Sunni. The remaining less than 1% is believed to comprise Baha'is, Christians, Kakai/Yarsans, Jews, Sabean-Mandaeans and Zoroastrians.⁶³

The Constitution of Cyprus provides that the Armenians, the Latins and the Maronites, as religious groups, may choose to belong to either the Greek-Cypriot or the Turkish-Cypriot community. The religious groups of the Armenians, the Latins and the Maronites opted to belong to the Greek-Cypriot community and therefore were represented in the Greek Communal Chamber by elected representatives, until the transfer of the Chamber's legislative functions to the House of Representatives in March 1965. In 1970, the House enacted the Law on Religious Groups (Representation), which provides for the representation of each religious group in the House by one representative, who is elected among his/her respective group according to the provisions of the electoral law. Ever since, the three representatives of the religious groups have been elected for a term of five years, like representatives of the House. They attend committee meetings to express their views on matters concerning their group. The three representatives of the religious groups also attend plenary meetings of the House without, however, a

right to vote. They also enjoy the same rights and privileges (non-liability, immunity, remuneration, tax exemptions) as other representatives. According to the 2011 census, 89.1% of the population is Greek Orthodox, 2.9% is Roman Catholic, 2% is Protestant and 1.8% is Muslim. Approximately 1% of the population is Buddhist, 0.5% is Maronite Catholic and 0.3% is Armenian Orthodox. There are also smaller populations of Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses and Baha'is.⁶⁴

The Parliament of Iraq (Council of Representatives) has 9 seats (out of 329) which are reserved for minority ethno-religious groups. Of those, Christians have five allocated seats, and the Sabean-Mandean and Yazidi communities each have one.⁶⁵ The most recent government statistics from Iraq are from 2010 and indicate that 97% of the population is Muslim (55–60% Shia and 40% Sunni). Other ethno-religious communities consist of Christians, Yazidis, Sabean-Mandaeans and Kakai (or Yarsan).⁶⁶

The lower chamber (House of Representatives) of the Parliament of Jordan has 12 (out of 115) seats reserved for minority groups, and of those 9 are for Christians.⁶⁷ The United States Government estimates the religious demographics of Jordan to be 97.1% Muslim (Sunni) and 2.1% Christian. Other communities which comprise less than 1% of the population include Buddhist, Baha'i, Hindu and Druze.⁶⁸

The Parliament of Mauritius has 8 seats (out of 70) reserved for ethno-religious communities to ensure their representation. The First Schedule to the Constitution acknowledges the existence of four communities in Mauritius: a Hindu community, a Muslim community and a Sino-Mauritian community, plus the general population, regarded as a fourth community comprising persons who do not identify with the other three communities. Data from a 2011 census indicates a religiously diverse population of which 48% is Hindu, 26% is Roman Catholic, 17% is Muslim (largely Sunni), 6% are non-Roman Catholic Christian and 3% are Buddhist, Baha'i, animists or non-affiliated.⁶⁹ The Constitution of Mauritius states that "[i]n order to ensure a fair and adequate representation of each community, there shall be 8 seats in the Assembly, additional to the 62 seats for members representing constituencies, which shall so far as is possible be allocated to persons belonging to parties who have stood as candidates for election." This is known as the "Best Loser System" as the seats are allocated to candidates who were not able to independently win one of the 62 seats. The first four of the eight seats are allocated to candidates who have the best results from the most under-represented ethno-religious community. The second four seats are allocated to candidates from the political party which has attained the highest number

58 IPU and UNDP, 2010.

59 Considering lower chambers, upper chambers and unicameral parliaments. See: IPU 2022b.

60 IPU, 2022c.

61 US DoS, 2022q.

62 IPU, 2022d. Iran (Islamic Republic of) 1979 (Rev. 1989) Constitution, Articles 13 and 64.

63 US DoS, 2022k.

64 Data is from the 2011 census, as reported in: US DoS 2022f.

65 IPU, 2022e.

66 US DoS, 2022l.

67 IPU, 2022f.

68 US DoS, 2022n.

69 US DoS, 2022p.



A creation by Sigmund Pollitzer, depicting the sun as life-giver, surrounded by Arabic and Cypro-Syllabic script, ancient vessels, a Franco-Byzantine church, part of a mosque (a minaret) and Saint Mamas on a lion's back, all framed by tragedy and demon masks. © Parliament of Cyprus

of seats in the election, but those candidates are selected from the most under-represented ethno-religious group.

The upper chamber (House of Lords) of the Parliament of the United Kingdom allocates 26 seats (out of 776, currently) to the Lords Spiritual, comprising archbishops and bishops of the Church of England. Upon retirement, their seat is inherited by the next most senior bishop, with the exception of the Archbishop of Canterbury, who is usually appointed a life peer.⁷⁰

In Lebanon, power sharing between different religions has existed since the National Pact of 1943. It stipulated that the Speaker of Parliament would be a Shia Muslim while the Prime Minister would be a Sunni Muslim and the President a Maronite Christian – in line with the relative size of religious communities as determined by the 1932 census. Quotas for representative seats were outlined by the National Pact and revised by the Taif Agreement of 1989 which helped end the long civil war.

The upper chamber (House of Peoples) of the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina has reserved seats based on ethnic affiliation. Its 15 members are from two entities that constitute the Bosnian State. Ten are from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (five Croats and five Bosniacs) and five are from the Republika Srpska (Serbs).⁷¹ These quotas based on ethnicity can also be viewed as

ethno-religious quotas as, generally speaking, the Croats predominantly identify as Roman Catholic, the Bosniacs as Muslim and the Serbs as Serbian Orthodox.⁷² This division of the House of Peoples is laid out in the Constitution from 1995,⁷³ following the end of a conflict that had a strong ethno-religious dimension.

Other parliaments did not have quotas but stated that, as their societies diversified, this too was reflected in the identity of the elected representatives. Milton Dick, Speaker of the Australian House of Representatives, was elected to his first term as Speaker following federal elections in May 2022. Speaker Dick believes that the current Parliament of Australia is the most diverse the country has ever seen. For the first time, Australia has a senator wearing a hijab in its national parliament. According to the 2021 census, Islam constitutes 3.2% of the population of Australia, up from 2.6% in the 2016 census.⁷⁴

The Parliament of Austria reflects similarly:

“In recent years, parliamentarians have come from more diverse religious backgrounds and beliefs and started to make those public. The political representation of persons from different religions and beliefs is not the result of specific practices but a delayed effect of religious pluralization as well as the general decline of religion in Austrian society.”⁷⁵

70 UK Parliament, 2022a.

71 IPU, 2022g.

72 US DoS, 2022c.

73 Bosnia and Herzegovina 1995 (rev. 2009) Constitution, Article IV (1).

74 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2022; ABS, 2017.

75 Interview conducted in 2022.

4. Consultation

A number of parliaments have mechanisms in place that facilitate consultation with stakeholders with different expertise from a spectrum of interest groups in society, including religious actors and representatives of belief systems. Key ways of consulting with external voices are through inviting experts to committee meetings, inviting religious actors to parliament and holding public hearings.⁷⁶

4.1. Committee meetings

Many parliaments have the obligation or the opportunity to invite witnesses or experts to give testimony at committee meetings or to submit written input. A number of parliaments shared examples of their own consultation mechanisms in which representatives of religions or belief systems could participate in parliamentary work.

In the Parliament of Canada, individuals can participate in studies undertaken by parliamentary committees, either by appearing before the committee in person or by providing written submissions. Individuals and entities can also petition parliament using a well-established petition process.

In the Gambia, relevant actors are asked by parliament to submit input on particular draft legislation, which is reviewed before the legislation is adopted.

In the Parliament of Latvia, any public non-governmental organization may apply to participate in the parliamentary body's meetings when draft laws are being discussed.

The Rules of Procedure of the National Assembly of Lebanon explicitly state that, during the meetings of the parliamentary committees, leaders or representatives of religious bodies can be summoned to attend and share their opinions during the discussion of bills or proposals of relevant laws.

In the Parliament of Spain, in all legislative procedures, the standing orders of the lower and upper chambers provide for the possibility of expert hearings, the opinions from which are presented in the commissions.

In the Parliament of Switzerland, there is a statutory consultation procedure, where draft bills are evaluated for accuracy, enforceability and acceptability. If a draft bill touches on religious beliefs, the relevant bodies are invited to review the draft bill before it is submitted to the parliament.

4.2. Inviting religious groups to parliament

A number of parliaments invite representatives of religious groups and belief systems to parliament periodically for exchanges on issues of common interest.

The Republic of Ireland is a Roman Catholic-majority country (78%) with 10% professing no religious affiliation and 3% identifying as Anglican. Muslims, Orthodox Christians, other Christians and other religions constitute 5% of the population.⁷⁷ The Ceann Comhairle (Speaker) of the Dáil Éireann (lower chamber) of the Oireachtas (parliament) of Ireland, Seán Ó Fearghail, introduced a practice of inviting representatives of all the religious groups into parliament for a twice-yearly dinner followed by cross-party discussions on relevant issues and how they might be approached. One such example was looking at the housing crisis in Ireland. Religious representatives and faith-based organizations are relevant actors for the parliament as many are active in combating poverty. In addition to meeting with religious leaders, Speaker Ó Fearghail has also met with the atheist representative group in Ireland. His personal motivation for starting this initiative he explains as follows:

“Politics is not just about leading, it is also about service, and religion in one shape or another is about leading and it is also about service, so we have a common interest in serving the needs of the people that we represent. It is far better that we at least understand each other if we are not in fact going to be working hand in glove with each other.”⁷⁸

This sentiment is echoed by a young MP from the United Arab Emirates, Meera Al-Suwaidi, who said: “When you look at interfaith, there is a very strong correlation to serving the public. It’s a very important aspect to look at from a parliamentary view.”⁷⁹

⁷⁶ The Global Parliamentary Report 2022 contains a broader section on consultation and emphasizes that “[t]he most widespread and established form of consultation is committee hearings”. See: IPU and UNDP, 2022, p. 28.

⁷⁷ US DoS, 2022m.

⁷⁸ Interview conducted in 2022.

⁷⁹ Interview conducted in 2022.



Ghana, a Christian-majority country with a strong Muslim community. © Musa Alcan / Anadolu Agency / Anadolu Agency via AFP

In the Seychelles, a small Roman Catholic-majority country with Anglican, Hindu, Muslim, Baha'i and other Christian minorities, there is an active interfaith scene.⁸⁰ The Seychelles Interfaith Council (SIFCO) was launched in 2012 during the World Interfaith Harmony Week, an annual UN Observance week.⁸¹ SIFCO is invited by parliament to present its views on various issues of national importance and is also in dialogue with the government.

Similarly, in Sierra Leone, the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRCSSL) has a number of functions, including advising the government – up to the president – and the parliament in their work, and also promoting social cohesion throughout the country. The IRCSSL was founded in 1997 and played an important role in shaping the Lomé Peace Agreement of 1999, which contributed to ending the eight-year civil war.⁸² Sierra Leone is a country of about 7 million people. Government statistics from 2020 indicate that 77% of the population is Muslim and 22% is Christian. Traditional religions are practised by about 2% of the population.⁸³ Sierra Leone has a history of peaceful interfaith coexistence, including intermarriage.

In Ghana – a Christian-majority country with a strong Muslim community of about 18% and smaller communities of other believers – parliamentary consultations with religious groups on interfaith issues are a regular feature.⁸⁴ The interests of different religions are represented by identified groups and

associations. These groups include the Christian Council of Ghana, the Ghana Pentecostal Council, the Catholic Bishops' Conference and the Office of the National Chief Imam.

In Belarus, a Christian Orthodox-majority country with Roman Catholic and non-affiliated minorities, dialogue exists between the national parliament and representatives of religious communities who are invited to the parliament to discuss issues of common interest in the form of dialogue platforms and expert sessions.⁸⁵ For instance, in 2021, a visiting session of the upper chamber of the Parliament of Belarus was held on the prevention of alcoholism and drug addiction, with the active participation of the Belarusian Orthodox Church.

The Federation Council of Russia holds "Christmas parliamentary meetings" which are attended by leaders of groups from religious traditions such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism, together with legislators, cultural and educational figures. According to the Russian Parliament, these meetings contribute to interreligious dialogue and promote cooperation. According to a 2021 poll, over 60% of the Russian population identifies as Orthodox Christian and 7% as Muslim. There are also small communities of Buddhists, Protestants, Catholics, Jews and others. Twenty-six per cent report having no religion.⁸⁶

80 US DoS, 2022t.

81 United Nations, 2022.

82 Turay in Lord, 2000.

83 US DoS, 2022u.

84 US DoS, 2022h.

85 US DoS, 2022b.

86 US DoS, 2022s.

4.3. Public participation

When the public is invited to participate in parliamentary processes, religious actors and organizations can participate in their capacity as individual members of the public, as well as community leaders who have influence over public opinion. A number of parliaments shared insights from their own public consultation processes.

In the Parliament of Denmark, public hearings are an integrated part of all new legislation.

The legislative process in the Parliament of Rwanda actually requires the consultation of citizens. Any revision of a bill must see the participation of the branch of the population directly concerned. Faith-based organizations are involved in processes through their representatives and by the coordination of the Rwanda Governance Board.

In the Parliament of Kenya, public participation in the work of parliament is guaranteed by the Constitution. Article 118.1.b of the 2010 Kenyan Constitution states that “Parliament shall [...] facilitate public participation and involvement in the legislative and other business of Parliament and its committees.”⁸⁷ Former Kenyan MP Jacqueline Oduol says that radio and newspapers are heavily used as tools to make the public aware of an issue and invite them to share input.

In Montenegro, public participation is conducted by consulting specific organizations and individuals in the preparation of a bill followed by a public discussion on the text of the bill. The latter occurs by the ministry publishing the text of the bill on its website and e-governance portal and inviting the public to share comments within a set time frame. After the public consultation is completed, the ministry compiles a report which is also published on its website and e-governance portal. Since organizations and individuals can be engaged in the public discussion process, representatives of different religious and belief groups can be included in this procedure.

Case study: Consultation via an intermediary – the Public Defender in Georgia

Georgia is a country of high ethnic and religious diversity. A 2014 census estimated that 83.4% of the population belonged to the Georgian Orthodox Church, 10.7% identified as Muslim and 2.9% as belonging to the Armenian Apostolic Church. The other 3% of the population was divided between Roman Catholics, Yezidis, Greek Orthodox, Jews and other newer religious communities, such as Baptists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Pentecostals, the International Society of Krishna Consciousness and those of no religious affiliation.⁸⁸

In Georgia, religious bodies – especially the Georgian Orthodox Church – hold significant influence in society, though there is no established parliamentary mechanism to engage with them. One way this is achieved is through the Public Defender, a national human rights mechanism which is written into Article 35 of the Georgian Constitution.⁸⁹ The mandate of the Public Defender is the “supervision of the protection of human rights within the territory of Georgia”.⁹⁰ The Public Defender is elected by parliament for a term of six years, by a three-fifths majority of members.

The Public Defender is an independent constitutional mechanism for the observation of human rights, though as this mechanism reports to parliament it can also be viewed as a parliamentary tool. The Public Defender reports to parliament on a permanent basis on rights-based issues, including those relating to freedom of religion or belief, and also shares recommendations. The Public Defender established a Council of Religions in 2005 which comprises 32 religious associations. It brings together the representatives of the religious groups in Georgia and offers a platform for them to share concerns, such as infringements of minority or other rights, and to exchange on different topics. This provides an indirect opportunity for parliament to be aware of the concerns and needs of religious groups. The Public Defender also has a Council of Ethnic Minorities and has established a Tolerance Centre which promotes social cohesion in Georgia through different activities and also monitors and addresses instances of intolerance perpetrated against ethnic, religious or other minority groups.⁹¹

87 Kenya 2010 Constitution.

88 US DoS, 2022g.

89 Public Defender (Ombudsman) of Georgia, 2022a.

90 Georgia 1995 (rev. 2018) Constitution.

91 Public Defender (Ombudsman) of Georgia, 2022b.

5. Parliamentary activities

In addition to engaging with religion and belief in the formal work of parliament, through legislation, committees, hearings and different types of consultation processes, parliaments have additional activities centred around religion or belief.

5.1. Non-partisan common interest groups

A number of parliaments lack standardized advisory and consultation mechanisms. Some of them have cross-party groups around certain faith-based issues. While they are located in parliament, they are not parliamentary bodies. They exist due to the efforts of parliamentarians who come together across party lines to engage in issues of common interest or concern.

The Parliament of the United Kingdom has a number of All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs) which focus on issues related to religion and belief. They bring together members of both chambers on the basis of a common interest in a policy area, region or country and can also involve external individuals or organizations in their work.⁹² The list of current APPGs is updated every six weeks. As of February 2023, the UK Parliament counted more than 700 APPGs.⁹³

A number of APPGs are concerned with religion and belief. Currently there are APPGs on International Freedom of Religion or Belief, Alevis, Safeguarding in Faith Communities, Baha'i Faith, Faith and Society, Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, Muslim Women, Antisemitism, British Jews, British Sikhs, British Muslims, Hajj and Umrah, Religious Education, Christianity in the Holy Land, and the Council of Sri Lankan Muslim Organisations UK. Several other APPGs address issues which have, at least partly, a faith-based dimension, such as APPGs on Hate Crime, Inclusive Growth, Rohingya, and Uyghurs.

In the Parliament of Canada, neither the Senate nor the House of Commons has an official parliamentary body to deal with religions or beliefs. Senators and members of the House of Commons can form unofficial caucuses on any topic of their choosing, including religion and beliefs. An All-Party Parliamentary Interfaith Caucus was launched in 2021 "with the goal of bringing together parliamentarians interested in the intersection of faith and politics."⁹⁴ Caucuses do not receive funding or administrative support from parliament and their deliberations are not considered parliamentary proceedings.

The Interfaith Caucus aims to promote dialogue between Canadian parliamentarians and national religious communities on issues of common interest or concern and to increase Canadian parliamentarians' understanding and appreciation of Canada's religious communities and their contribution to society. It engages with civil society and supports initiatives which promote understanding between different religions and beliefs. The Interfaith Caucus also organizes an interfaith prayer breakfast.⁹⁵

The Co-Chair of the Caucus, MP Daniel Blaikie, sees great value in these kinds of interfaith initiatives as providing an opportunity for people to express, in an appropriate way, their religious commitments and how these influence their politics. Although Canada does not have an official religion, Blaikie acknowledges the important role that religion can play in influencing people's political views. While he does not believe that the views or values of one particular religion should influence the Canadian State's position on issues, he underlines the importance of acknowledging people's religion or belief and the role it plays in shaping their political position. He sees in the Interfaith Caucus:

"an opportunity to try and identify some kind of hot button political issues [...] and to try and set the stage for exactly this kind of dialogue we're talking about where we can get different faith perspectives on a particular issue and hear from experts who are situated themselves within a certain faith tradition. And then also hear from Parliamentarians too in order to try and foster a positive and a safe place for that kind of discussion of how faith can inform people's political positions on various important issues of the day."

In a similar vein, the Parliament of Australia has Parliamentary Friendship Groups, though at present none have a specific focus on religion or belief.

92 UK Parliament, 2022b.

93 UK Parliament, 2023.

94 Longhurst, 2021.

95 Canadian Interfaith Conversation, 2021.

The Parliament of Kenya has a network called Catholic MPs Spiritual Support Initiative (CAMPSSI). It is a cross-party caucus consisting of Catholic members of the Kenyan Parliament, with the goal of providing them “with spiritual accompaniment and formation, network them with like minds globally and provide the missing link between the political regime within the Kenyan Parliament and the Church hierarchy aimed at increasing interactive relations for the common good.”⁹⁶ The origins of the network began in 2008 when the country was experiencing post-election violence and there was a concern to bridge the gap between the parties on the basis of shared common values, such as those that are faith-based. Informal meetings began in 2011, and in 2012 the CAMPSSI caucus was founded when the network of Catholic parliamentarians began a formal partnership with Tangaza University College in Tanzania. The goal was to complement the cross-party networking with an institution that could support parliamentarians in particular in the areas of socio-economic development. The caucus meets weekly, celebrating a eucharist and then holding a network meeting. Once a month they hold a School of Politics, which is an opportunity for parliamentarians to further educate themselves on different legislation passed in parliament. CAMPSSI also supports projects of local churches and organizes interfaith activities. In 2013, CAMPSSI was officially recognized by the Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops.⁹⁷

5.2. Annual debate on freedom of religion or belief

The UK Parliament has an annual debate on freedom of religion or belief, which focuses on threats to religious freedom worldwide. In 2022, the UK Government held an International Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief, which was attended by government members, parliamentarians, civil society representatives, subject matter experts and representatives of religions and beliefs, to discuss contemporary global issues threatening freedom of religion or belief. This conference attracted international attention and high-profile panellists.⁹⁸



US President Joe Biden speaks during the 71st National Prayer Breakfast at the US Capitol in Washington, DC, on 2 February 2023. © Andrew Caballero-Reynolds / AFP

⁹⁶ CAMPSSI, 2022.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2022.

5.3. Religious celebrations

The Parliament of Ghana organizes a Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols, a service celebrating the coming birth of Jesus. It is traditionally held on Christmas Eve, though the service organized by the parliament is held a few days before Christmas. It is attended by the Speaker of Parliament, parliamentarians, members of government and some clergy. The Parliament of Ghana also holds a celebration for Eid al-Adha. On both occasions, Members from both the Christian and Muslim religions participate in the services.

A number of parliaments have cross-party prayer groups. The Parliament of Lithuania has a Provisional Prayer Group for Roman Catholic members. The Parliaments of Romania and Hungary have ecumenical prayer groups. In Hungary, the prayer group is led by the chair of the Committee on Justice, which is one of the committees also responsible for religious affairs. The Hungarian ecumenical prayer group conducted a 24-hour prayer chain on the first anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The Parliament of Australia has a Parliamentary Christian Fellowship, which comes together weekly for a prayer session in Parliament House. The Fellowship also organizes the annual prayer breakfast in the Australian Parliament.

Other parliaments which celebrate an annual national prayer breakfast include the United Kingdom (National Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast), Kenya (National Prayer Breakfast) and the US Congress (National Prayer Breakfast).

5.4. Ad hoc symbolic events

Following the Christchurch mosque shootings in 2019, in which 51 people died and 40 were injured when an armed man entered two mosques during Friday prayer and shot worshippers, the Parliament of New Zealand invited a delegation of interfaith religious leaders for a service in parliament. The parliament suspended its rules for this service, which would normally not allow for “strangers” – or non-parliamentarians – to enter into the debate chamber. Former MP Louisa Wall said, “the country came together, we were united in our grief”.

In 2019, Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed El Tayeb, jointly signed a watershed interfaith *document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, which has since laid the foundation for many interfaith conferences and is also behind the UN-designated International Day of Human Fraternity, celebrated on 4 February each year. In 2022, Timor-Leste became the first country to adopt the principles of the document on human fraternity into its national values. Following the presidential elections in March/April 2022, the newly elected President José Ramos-Horta submitted the document to the national parliament, which unanimously agreed to adopt it and commit to its values of global peace, dialogue and respect for human rights. The President further intends to include this document in school curricula, and the parliament encouraged the government and citizens to promote its values of peaceful coexistence.⁹⁹ Timor-Leste is one of two Christian-majority countries in Asia, the other being the Philippines. Census data indicates that 97.6% of the population is Catholic, 2% is Protestant and less than 1% is Muslim.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Ramos-Horta, 2022.

¹⁰⁰ US DoS, 2022x.

6. Parliamentary attitudes towards religion and belief

Parliaments stand at the nexus between the tradition in which a country is steeped and upon which its institutions were established, and the values of its contemporary citizens. This is often visible in how religion or belief is expressed in parliament. There can be an ambivalence in the respective practices depending on whether or not they have been updated to reflect the actual diversity of society.

6.1. Prayers before parliamentary sittings¹⁰¹

A number of parliaments, including the parliaments of Tanzania, Malta, the United Kingdom, Ireland, New Zealand, Australia, Guyana and Canada, begin each session of one or both chambers with a prayer. For many of these, the prayer has been adapted over the years.

At the beginning of each sitting of the National Assembly of the Parliament of Guyana, a prayer is recited. When Guyana gained independence from Britain in 1966, the tradition of the prayer was kept but it was adapted to reflect the country's ethnic and religious diversity and heritage. Speaker Manzoor Nadir explained: "It is a general prayer. We have so many religions and the three main religions – Christians, Muslims, Hindus – are basically treated equally. We also have other faiths – Baha'i, Rastafarian and persons with their own beliefs." The prayer is adapted from the words of the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore:

"Almighty God, we, who are here gathered together, do most humbly beseech Thee, to guide us in all our consultations, so that we may together build a land where knowledge is free, where the mind is without fear, and the head is held high, and where words come from the depth of truth.

Grant us, O God, Thine aid and guidance, so that we may deal justly, with the several causes that come before us, laying aside all private interests, prejudices and personal preferences, so that the result of our counsels may be to the glory of thy Blessed Name, the maintenance of true religion, the preservation of justice, the safety, honour and happiness of the President, and the peace and prosperity of Guyana.

Grant us, O God, the vision so to lead, that all the people of this fair land may enter into that state of brotherhood and unity, where the mind is led forward by thee into ever widening thought and action."¹⁰²

The lower chamber of the Parliament of Ireland begins each day with a Christian prayer which is recited by the Speaker. A period of quiet reflection has been added for those who do not wish to participate in the prayer.

In the Parliament of New Zealand, the prayer or karakia is read out in a variety of languages, including the official spoken languages of New Zealand: English and te reo Māori (the language of the indigenous population of mainland New Zealand, the Māori people). New Zealand also celebrates different language weeks throughout the year, and the parliament may read the prayer in the language of that week, for instance in Mandarin or one of the Pacific Island languages.

In the Parliament of Canada, a prayer is read each sitting day in both the Senate and the House of Commons. The prayer is read in private, prior to the doors of either chamber having been opened to the public. The prayer is the first order of business in both chambers, pursuant to the Rules of the Senate and the Standing Orders of the House of Commons. According to the House of Commons Procedure and Practice from 1994, "the House concurred in a report recommending a new form of prayer more reflective of the different religions embraced by Canadians."¹⁰³

The Standing Orders for both the Senate and the House of Commons of the Parliament of Australia require each daily session to begin with a prayer and an acknowledgement of country. Both the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President of the Senate read the acknowledgement of country, which refers to the traditional custodians of the land on which the parliamentary session is taking place, before a prayer for the work of parliament and the Lord's Prayer.¹⁰⁴

In the House of Commons of the Parliament of the United Kingdom, daily prayers are carried out before the commencement of a public sitting. The prayers are conducted by the Speaker's Chaplain.

¹⁰¹ For a detailed analysis of parliamentary prayers, see also: Library & Research Service (L&RS), 2016. This report also provides some insights into spaces such as a prayer room, chapel, meditation room or mosque in some parliaments.

¹⁰² Parliament of Guyana, 2018.

¹⁰³ Bosc and Gagnon, 2017.

¹⁰⁴ Parliament of Australia, 2022a; Parliament of Australia, 2022b.

Prayers in the UK House of Commons and the Speaker's Chaplain

The tradition of reading daily prayers in the House of Commons is believed to date back to the 16th century when, records suggest, these tasks were undertaken by the Clerk of the House of Commons. In 1660, a chaplain replaced the Clerk in this function, earning the title Chaplain for the Commons. In the 1830s, the Chaplain became salaried and the role gradually expanded beyond prayers. It became tradition for the Speaker to select the Chaplain. When the Chaplain conducts the daily prayers, there is a degree of ritual attached to it:

“Prayers take place immediately after the Speaker’s procession to the Chamber. Only Members are allowed to be present in the Chamber during prayers, and by tradition, they stand up and face the benches rather than the centre of the House while prayers are said. The origins of this custom are unclear, but it is thought this practice developed due to the difficulty Members would historically have faced of kneeling to pray while wearing a sword.”¹⁰⁵

The tasks of the present day Speaker’s Chaplain include reading the given daily prayers in the House of Commons chamber and introducing topical elements, conducting a weekly Eucharist at the Parliamentary Chapel (St. Mary Undercroft), occasional special services and a monthly service followed by a speaker and discussion

in St. Margaret’s Westminster Abbey for MPs and Peers. The Chaplain also cares for the pastoral needs of parliamentarians and members of staff, as part of which they officiate at baptisms, weddings and memorial services. The Speaker’s Chaplain also has a ceremonial function, working with the Speaker’s team on acts of commemoration, celebration and consolation for the parliamentary community such as the marking of Holocaust Memorial Day, Armed Forces Day and events to mark the death of a serving MP.

The Speaker’s Chaplain works closely with the Christians in Parliament APPG, which holds Bible study and prayer groups, speaker events and discussion groups, policy discussion and briefings – all related to issues intersecting with Christian faith and theology. This APPG also organizes a National Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast.¹⁰⁶

In recent times it has been possible to restore the previously long-standing link with Westminster Abbey, and the Speaker’s Chaplain also serves as a Canon of Westminster.



Lindsay Hoyle, Speaker of the UK House of Commons with chaplain to the Speaker of the House of Commons, Reverend Tricia Hillas. © UK Parliament

¹⁰⁵ UK Parliament, 2022e.

¹⁰⁶ Christians in Parliament (APPG), 2022.

6.2. Dress codes

In some traditions, religion or belief can also be expressed through clothing. Common examples include the turban, worn by Sikh men, a kippah – also known as a yarmulke, skullcap or koppel – worn by some Jewish men, or head coverings, worn by some Muslim women. A number of parliaments have a dress code and there have been debates in some parliaments about the degree to which this infringes upon the religious rights of parliamentarians.

Some examples of different attitudes towards clothing in parliaments include:

Article 209 of the Rules of the House of Councillors of the Parliament of Japan states: “No one shall enter the Chamber or Committee meeting rooms with a hat, overcoat, scarf, umbrella, stick and the like on or with him.”

In the Parliament of Canada, Speakers of the Senate and House of Commons have by convention allowed Senators and MPs to wear religious clothing when participating in debates in both chambers.

In 2018, the lower chamber (Assemblée nationale) of the Parliament of France amended its Rules of Procedure to introduce a “neutral” dress code which banned members from “the wearing of conspicuous religious symbols, uniforms, logos or commercial messages or political slogans.”¹⁰⁷ This regulation not only banned Muslim women from wearing headscarves, but also Jewish men from wearing skullcaps or Sikh men from wearing a turban. The ruling was prompted by a member of parliament wearing a football jersey while speaking about taxing the transfer of football players. Article 9 of the General Instructions for the National Assembly now clarifies that “in the hemicycle, expression is exclusively oral.”

In 2021, the Government of Tanzania released a pamphlet visually depicting the dress code guidelines for public servants, including members of parliament. The pamphlet, which references a public service document from 2020, shows acceptable and unacceptable clothing for female and male public servants in casual, smart casual and smart settings. The new guidelines clarify that for a woman, a headscarf is permitted to be worn with any of the prescribed clothing choices.¹⁰⁸

Case study: Head and face coverings

The issue of head and face coverings has been debated in different parliaments around the world, especially with regard to the veiling of Muslim women.

Legislation exists in some States which requires women to wear a head covering in public. The Islamic Republic of Iran has made veiling in public mandatory since 1983, with punishment for non-adherence outlined in the Islamic Punishment Law.

Other States have legislation which prohibits certain coverings – ranging from a veil which covers the head and hair, to a covering where either only the eyes of the woman are visible (niqab) or the whole face is covered (burqa)– in public spaces or in public schools, universities and government buildings. In 2004, the French Parliament passed a law on secularity and conspicuous religious symbols, banning symbols or clothing which clearly show religious affiliation, including head coverings, from public schools. This was followed in 2010 by a law prohibiting the concealment of the face in public spaces.¹⁰⁹ This ban includes anything that hides the face, not only the niqab or burqa but also masks, balaclavas or helmets, but it does not prohibit head coverings such as the hijab, skullcap or turban, which do not obscure the face.

The Swiss Confederation organized a national referendum in March 2021 responding to an initiative from the Swiss People’s

Party on whether to ban full-face coverings. The Swiss Federal Council and Parliament itself spoke out against the proposal and offered a counter-proposal – valid if the referendum were to fail – which demanded that people show their face when necessary for identification purposes. This suggestion also included measures to strengthen women’s rights, for instance, to encourage efforts to integrate immigrant women instead of further excluding them through prohibitions which come with referendums.¹¹⁰ Despite this alternative suggestion, the referendum passed with a majority of 51.2% voting “yes”. It is now prohibited to wear full face coverings in public, including a burqa or a niqab. Internationally, a total of 16 States have a full or partial ban on face coverings.

The majority of States have no official regulation about wearing face or head coverings in public, though religious authorities’ stance towards religious dress can be influential. Islam has its own legal framework which includes making Islamic legal rulings, known as fatwas. National legislation is therefore not the only or even the primary authority in some communities with regard to religious dress and behaviour.

The reasons that some religious authorities or state legislation oblige women to wear a face or head covering comes from an interpretation of the Qur’an and the Hadith, two pillars of Islamic jurisprudence.

107 Assemblée nationale, 2018.

108 President’s Office Public Service Management and Good Governance, 2020.

109 Law No. 2010-1192 of 2010.

110 Federal Council, 2022.



Turkish MP Ravza Kavakci Kan attending the 146th IPU Assembly in Manama, Bahrain. © IPU/Parliament of Bahrain

There are varying reasons given for banning women from wearing face coverings or a veil. In Chad, a Muslim-majority country in the Sahel region of Africa where religious extremism is threatening regional stability, the burqa was banned by the government after suicide bombings were perpetrated by Nigerian Boko Haram militants wearing burqas. Security concerns have been cited by other parliaments and governments as the reason behind bans on face veils, especially as a full-face covering makes it more difficult to identify someone.¹¹¹ Other reasons for banning or criticizing the face veil, especially in the Western European context, include viewing it as incompatible with the values of different expressions of secularism, as incompatible with the broader culture and values of society or with liberal democracy, as a sign of radical or political Islam, as a tool of oppression or coercion of women, and as impeding the reciprocity inherent in communication.¹¹²

There have been criticisms of these reasons as being disingenuous. Dissenting voices say that these laws are driven in some societies

by Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment. Canadian Muslim Senator Salma Atallahjan observes that the regulations around masking since the coronavirus pandemic have clearly shown that the debate around the burqa is highly racialized. The recommendation to wear masks can lead to a similar result in one's appearance, but is free of the stigma attached to the niqab or burqa.

Banning different forms of Islamic dress has been criticized by some as contravening the right to externally manifest religion or belief. Turkish MP Ravza Kavakci Kan described a long-standing ban on wearing headscarves in public institutions in Türkiye as "an institutional form of discrimination". Ms. Kavakci Kan says that she wore the veil out of her own religious conviction. As she was not allowed to wear a veil at any public university she decided to complete her studies in the United States of America, where her religious freedom was guaranteed. The ban on wearing the veil in public institutions in Türkiye was lifted in 2013.

111 Grillo and Shah, 2012.

112 Ibid.

6.3. Commemoration of religious events and religious heritage by parliament

A number of parliaments commemorate certain days with a religious association, such as National Bible Day or International Holocaust Remembrance Day.¹¹³

The Parliament of Canada celebrates the diverse faces of Canadian identity. In recent years, indigenous peoples' ceremonies and cultural/spiritual practices have started appearing more prominently in parliament. Smudging ceremonies (during which plants, usually sage, are burned to cleanse and purify) have been conducted before some events in the parliamentary precinct. Indigenous languages are also increasingly being used in parliament, most notably during committee hearings, allowing indigenous witnesses and parliamentarians to interact in their mother tongue. In addition, significant religious communities are singled out in different months. For instance, April is Sikh Heritage Month, May is Canadian Jewish Heritage Month, in September there is a Mennonite Heritage Week and October is Canadian Islamic History Month. There is also a National Day of Remembrance of the Quebec City Mosque Attack and Action Against Islamophobia on 29 January.

Parliaments have other ways of honouring different religions or beliefs. The Israeli Knesset adapts its daily work to cater for events within the religious calendar. Avi Dichter, Israeli Member of the Knesset and current Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, explains:

“When we have voting during Ramadan, they give you a gap of a few hours to make sure that the Muslim members of the Knesset will be able to break the fast. Whenever there’s a special holiday – Eid Al Adha, Eid Al Fitr – you honour them and you don’t bring bills to vote unless there is a total agreement and there’s no problem about it. [...] We do it with Jewish members and we do it with Muslim members.”¹¹⁴

During Ramadan in 2023, Speaker Amir Ohana hosted representatives from Albania, Bahrain, Kosovo, Kazakhstan, Morocco, Nigeria, Tanzania, Türkiye and the United Arab Emirates for an iftar dinner in the Knesset.

In the Parliament of Egypt, working hours are generally shorter during the month of Ramadan so that Muslim members are able to break their fast with the iftar meal. This is not a rule but a general courtesy that is observed when possible. In Egypt, it is estimated that 90% of the population is Muslim (majority Sunni) and 10% is Christian. The biggest Christian group is the Coptic Orthodox Church, which constitutes about 90% of the Christian community.¹¹⁵ While the Coptic Orthodox Christmas, which is celebrated on 7 January – following the Julian calendar –, is a public holiday, parliament also observes the tradition of not holding any sessions on 25 December, the Christmas Day observed by Western churches (following the Gregorian calendar).



Speaker Amir Ohana of the Israeli Knesset hosted representatives of countries with Muslim populations for an Iftar meal during Ramadan, 2023. © Parliament of Israel

¹¹³ International Holocaust Remembrance Day commemorates all victims of the holocaust, including not only Jewish people but also other minorities.

¹¹⁴ Interview conducted in 2022.

¹¹⁵ US DoS, 2022f.

6.4. Oaths and affirmations of office

Oaths of office are frequently part of the swearing-in of parliamentarians, required before they are permitted to assume parliamentary duties. A number of oaths are sworn in the name of God. Parliaments have several ways of catering for members who belong to different religions or who profess no belief. Some parliaments offer the possibility of swearing an affirmation instead of an oath, in which religious references may be omitted. Others offer different religious texts which can be sworn upon.

In the Swiss Parliament, new members must either swear an oath or make a solemn promise before assuming office. The text of the oath states: “I swear by the Almighty God to uphold the Constitution and the law and to fulfil the duties of my office to the best of my abilities.” The text of the solemn promise states: “I solemnly promise to uphold the Constitution and the law and to fulfil the duties of my office to the best of my abilities.”¹¹⁶

The oath taken by incoming parliamentarians to the Parliament of Ghana is detailed in the Standing Orders of the Parliament of Ghana. It makes explicit reference to God, can be sworn on the Bible or Qur’an or also as an affirmation without

any religious reference.¹¹⁷ The same practice exists in the Parliament of Sierra Leone.¹¹⁸

The procedures for swearing in at the Islamic Parliament of Iran are reflected in its rules of procedure. Members of the Assembly take an oath either at the first session of the Assembly or at the first session they attend. They swear “in the Name of God [...] in the presence of the Glorious Qur’an...”. Religious minorities are permitted to take the same oath but swearing on their holy book.¹¹⁹ After swearing the oath, members will also sign a text of it.

The Manual of Rules of Procedure, Practices and Conventions of the Parliament of Guyana states that incoming members of parliament have the option of swearing an oath on the Qur’an, the Bible or the Bhagavad Gita – the scriptures of the three main religions of the State – or of making a solemn affirmation instead of taking an oath.¹²⁰ The wording of the oath itself is not faith-based.

Incoming members of parliament in the Indonesian People’s Representative Council must swear an oath in the name of God, part of which states their commitment to uphold the Pancasila, the five principles underlying the national ideology of Indonesia.¹²¹ The first principle of the Pancasila is the acknowledgement of monotheism.

116 Confédération suisse, 2021.

117 Parliament of Ghana, 2000; Ghana 1992 (rev. 1996) Constitution; statements about swearing on the Bible or Qur’an from an interview with a Ghanaian parliamentarian.

118 Sierra Leone 1991 (reinst. 1996, rev. 2013) Constitution, Third Schedule to the Constitution.

119 Iran (Islamic Republic of) 1979 (rev. 1989) Constitution; see: Islamic Parliament of Iran, 2014.

120 Parliament of Guyana, 2007.

121 House of Representatives of the Republic of Indonesia, 2015.

7. Regional and international parliamentary engagement

There are a number of (inter-)parliamentary organizations which work to promote common interests and support parliamentary work. Examples are given below of inter-parliamentary initiatives with a religious or belief dimension, including the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy, a network of parliaments brought together by their shared Orthodox Christian faith, and the International Parliament for Tolerance and Peace, whose mandate is to engage parliamentarians worldwide in working to promote peaceful coexistence and respect, including through interfaith dialogue.

7.1. Inter-parliamentary dialogue and networking

[Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy](#)

The Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (IAO) is an inter-parliamentary organization that works for cooperation between parliaments of countries with a Christian Orthodox community, guided by the common values of the shared Orthodox faith and a desire to work for the institutional promotion and protection of the Orthodox Christian tradition. It was founded in 1994 at the initiative of the Greek (Hellenic) Parliament in response to many changes occurring in Europe resulting from the dissolution of the Soviet Union (1988–1991) and the foundation of the European Union (1993). A need was identified to found an organization which drew on the contribution of Orthodoxy, as a common cultural expression of a large number of people, to shape this new Europe and to provide guidance in responding to spiritual, sociocultural and political challenges.

Article 3 of the Founding Act from the first convention in 1994 names the following key objectives behind the founding of the IAO:

- “[...] b. The enhancement of the role of Orthodoxy within the framework of the European Union and the consolidation of Orthodoxy as an important and necessary political cultural and spiritual entity geared towards the shaping of a new European reality.
- c. The contribution of the ecumenical and unifying spirit of Orthodoxy both towards the transcendence of extreme nationalistic, confessionary and religious contradictions and the discovery of effective means for the protection of ethnic or religious minorities. [...]”

- e. The support of the role of Orthodox culture as a unifying force in Eastern Europe and as a bridge for Europe in its relationships with the other cultures. [...]
- h. The encouragement of contacts between parliamentary, political, ecclesiastical, academic and spiritual figures, or institutions geared towards the development of an Orthodox cultural heritage and their contribution to the contemporary global dialogue on human rights and the peaceful coexistence of peoples.
- i. The fuller activation of Orthodoxy with the purpose of its promoting solutions to the critical problems of contemporary European society and the ecological environment.”¹²²

The IAO was initially called the European Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (EIAO). It changed its name to the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy in 2001 when it allowed groups of Orthodox extra-European parliamentarians to attend its assemblies. It has since expanded its cooperation agreements to include non-Orthodox parliamentary assemblies.

In 2018, the IAO, together with the Lebanese National Assembly and in cooperation with the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union, organized a conference in Beirut entitled *Unity in diversity and fundamental freedoms for Christians and Muslims in the Middle East: A conference for parliamentary dialogue*. It was attended by approximately 75 parliamentarians from 16 European, Arab and Asian countries. The Final Declaration highlighted the importance of national legislation being in line with universal human rights, encouraged participants to promote the identity of national, cultural, language, religious or ethnic groups as well as their right to live in community with others, and supported interreligious and inter-ethnic dialogue at the national and international level.¹²³

[International Parliament for Tolerance and Peace](#)

The International Parliament for Tolerance and Peace (IPTP) is the legislative arm of the Global Council for Tolerance and Peace (GCTP).

The GCTP is a non-governmental organization founded in 2017 by Ahmed Al Jarwan, an Emirati politician who served on the Federal National Council of the United Arab Emirates from 2011 to 2019 and as President of the Arab Parliament from 2012 to 2016. Reacting to the fractured state of the world and the spread of extremism and violence, the GCTP was founded to contribute to the promotion of a culture of tolerance and peace. The organization is guided by the principles of the United Nations and international law in its work. The GCTP has its headquarters in Malta.¹²⁴

¹²² EIAO, 1994.

¹²³ Declaration in: Mygdalis, 2021, pp.199–202.

¹²⁴ GCTP, 2022a.



2018 meeting of the IAO in Beirut. © IAO

The IPTP was launched in 2018 by the Parliament of Malta, as the representative body and legislative arm of the GCTP. It was launched within the term of the current Speaker of the House of Representatives of Malta, Angelo Farrugia. Speaker Farrugia sees an important role for his parliament, which is very engaged in the IPTP, in using interfaith dialogue as a peacebuilding tool:

“We embrace interfaith as a culture, and we embrace intercultural dialogue. We feel that parliament has a very important role. It is parliament itself, politicians themselves – the representatives of the people – that must act to raise strong awareness not only of the rights and obligations relating to diversity and religious tolerance, but also of the benefits, spearheading the development of equality policies, in order to achieve real change to fight discrimination.”¹²⁵

The IPTP comprises members of national parliaments and aims to meet quarterly to discuss and provide recommendations on issues raised by the General Assembly and the Governing Body of the GCTP, as well as other topics of current international importance which relate to tolerance and peace. Parliamentarians from over 85 national parliaments belong to the IPTP.¹²⁶

The IPTP is active in global discussions relating to interfaith and intercultural dialogue. The GCTP co-organized two sessions at the 2021 G20 Interfaith Forum on *The role of parliamentarians in interfaith dialogue*. The inclusion of sessions about parliamentarians and interfaith dialogue was a new addition to the programme of the 2021 G20 Interfaith Forum, as were ministerial sessions.

The IAO and the IPTP are both Permanent Observers of the IPU.

¹²⁵ Interview conducted in 2022.

¹²⁶ GCTP, 2022b.

7.2 Extra-parliamentary dialogue and networking

Many parliaments and parliamentary organizations, including the IPTP, are engaged in relationship-building and dialogue with extra-parliamentary actors. This often occurs when two organizations share common goals. There are many instances of parliamentary cooperation with religious actors in the spirit of partnership for common ends.

[Climate change](#)

Climate change is an area where many interfaith actors and organizations are active. Pope Francis made it the topic of his second encyclical, *Laudato si'*, in 2015.¹²⁷ In September 2021, ahead of the COP26 UN Climate Change Conference, he also published a joint statement on the environment together with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby. The statement, entitled *A joint message for the protection of creation*, calls for common action to prevent climate change.¹²⁸ On 4 October 2021, a broader interfaith statement, *Faith and science: An appeal for COP26*, was signed by the Pope and interfaith leaders in the Vatican, before it was handed to the COP26 President, British MP Alok Sharma.¹²⁹

Only a few days later, the IPU also co-organized a pre-COP26 Parliamentary Meeting, together with the Italian Parliament in Rome, Italy on 8 and 9 October 2021. Part of this meeting included an audience with the Pope, where he presented the *Appeal for COP26* to the delegation. Rick Nimmo, Director of the British Group to the IPU, said:

“We sat in a room and basically found that we had the same common view [...]. We saw it as adding credibility and weight to our plea for action, the fact that we could associate the Pope’s name with our work. To that degree it was a huge multiplier for us. And I can imagine he was seeing it in the same way [...] he can say he has also engaged [with] parliamentarians.”

The Outcome Document of the Parliamentary Meeting held during COP26 on 7 November 2021 referenced the meeting with the Pope and the *Appeal for COP26*.¹³⁰

[Nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation](#)

The field of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation of weapons is also one where both parliamentarians and religious actors have been jointly engaged. In 2013, the global interfaith non-governmental organization Religions for Peace

first published a *Resource guide on nuclear disarmament for religious leaders and communities*.¹³¹ It contained a number of references to parliamentary organizations, publications, resolutions and quotes from individual parliamentarians.

A subsequent milestone came in 2015, when three organizations – Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (PNND), Religions for Peace, and Mayors for Peace – issued a joint statement in Hiroshima, Japan, entitled *A nuclear-weapon-free world: Our common good*. This marked the dropping of the first nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as the founding of the United Nations, both of which had taken place 70 years earlier, in 1945. The statement, with the stated goal “to support multilateral negotiations for the elimination of nuclear weapons”,¹³² said:

“Together – as mayors, parliamentarians and religious leaders – we support the common good of nuclear abolition. We reject nuclear weapons, which threaten our humanity, contravene our moral principles, violate international law and thwart the safety and well-being of current and future generations.

We commit to principled action to advance shared security and well-being based on deeply held and widely shared moral principles, the rule of law and a profound commitment to non-violent conflict resolution.”¹³³

The joint statement was subsequently presented to the United Nations in Geneva on 25 September, the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons. The UN Office in Geneva, the main location for diplomacy around disarmament and non-proliferation, is also the home of the Conference on Disarmament, a body for multilateral disarmament negotiations which provides support for many disarmament agreements.¹³⁴ The joint statement was also presented to the head of the United Nations General Assembly, Mogens Lykkesoft, in New York on 29 September 2015. The statement was presented in all three cities by representatives of the three organizations behind it, including Saber Chowdhury, Co-President of the PNND and then-President of the IPU.

In September 2022, the Strategic Concept for the Removal of Arms and Proliferation (SCRAP Weapons) initiative, in collaboration with the IPU, organized a hybrid seminar themed around the activation of a fourth special session of the UN General Assembly devoted to disarmament. One of the panels focused on the role of interreligious dialogue for peace and disarmament. One of its goals is to build a global coalition of different religious actors working together for peace.¹³⁵ SCRAP Weapons is housed within the Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy at SOAS University of London.

127 Francis, 2015.

128 Francis, Bartholomew I and Welby, 2021.

129 Francis and others, 2021; see also: Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2021.

130 IPU, 2021.

131 Ware, 2013.

132 Mayors for Peace, Religions for Peace, and PNND, 2015.

133 Ibid.

134 UNODA [no date].

135 SCRAP Weapons, 2022.

Other dialogues with a faith dimension

There are also examples where religious identity is one of the factors within a broader dialogue process. Members of the Federation Council of Russia are active in a number of intercultural exchanges, including with the Russia–Islamic World Strategic Vision Group, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the OIC Parliamentary Union.

The Russia–Islamic World Strategic Vision Group was established in 2006 after Russia gained observer status at the OIC. It was founded by Evgeny Primakov and Mintimer Shaimiev. Primakov was an Arabist by training who held various high-ranking positions within the Government of the Russian Federation and the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. Shaimiev was the first President of Tatarstan (1991–2010), a republic within the Russian Federation where Muslim Tatars are the biggest ethno-religious group. The chair of the Group is the current President of the Republic of Tatarstan, Rustam Minnikhanov, and the deputy chair of the Group is Deputy Chair of the Federation Council Committee on Foreign Affairs and former Prime Minister of Tatarstan, Farid Mukhametshin.

The mission of the Russia–Islamic World Strategic Vision Group is to strengthen relations between the Russian Federation and the nations of the Islamic world. At the inaugural meeting in 2006, Primakov gave two reasons for the importance of this Group:

“The first reason, which unites us all, is understanding of one of the main dangers in the modern world – its division on the basis of religious and civilizational principle [...] Russia is one of the great powers that influences the international life and in this capacity it can and already is doing everything in order to prevent the development of this tendency that threatens the entire humanity.

The second reason for the creation of our Group aimed at the dialogue between Russian and leading Islamic representatives is the special ethnic-religious situation in Russia. Millions of Muslims live there. And they are not immigrants, like in many Western countries, but an organic part of the indigenous population. Perhaps there is no other State, the indigenous population of which consists of a Christian majority and a Muslim minority, that can be an example of peaceful living, cultural interpenetration and the creation of a unique community, like Russia. At the same time the position of Russia as “the bridge” between Europe and Asia is unique.”¹³⁶

The Group has members from 27 States in the Islamic world. Meetings have been held in Moscow, Kazan, Istanbul, Jeddah and Kuwait to discuss issues of common concern, including countering terrorism, international relations, and Russia–Islamic world relations. The Group cooperates with the OIC.

136 Russia–Islamic World Strategic Vision Group, 2019.

Outlook

This report is intended as a contribution to dialogue and learning between political, religious and other spheres about issues of common concern. Part 1 of the report focuses on showcasing examples of different ways that religion and belief are institutionally present in the life and work of parliaments.

The present report hopes to encourage parliaments to engage in self-reflection, especially to assess whether the mechanisms they have in place to engage with religion and belief are inclusive, transparent and representative. Another related issue that merits more in-depth exploration is the role of parliaments in promoting freedom of religion or belief and in countering expressions of intolerance against people on the basis of their religion or belief.

The conversation will be continued at the Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue (Marrakesh, June 2023), which will bring together political and religious leaders along with representatives of faith-based and civil society organizations and subject matter experts to explore avenues for joint action to promote the rule of law, peace and inclusion in our societies.

Part 2 of the report will subsequently combine takeaways from the Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue with insights of individual parliamentarians into how their work engages with religion and belief.

The IPU welcomes further input from national parliaments, associate members and permanent observer organizations, and other interested individuals and organizations. We invite you to contact us at: postbox@ipu.org.

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Methodology and data sources

The report makes use of a range of data sources:

Interviews: Over the course of 2022, a total of 48 interviews were conducted with 55 parliamentarians, parliamentary staff, staff of the IPU Secretariat and subject matter experts. The interviews were conducted in a hybrid manner. In-person interviews took place during the Annual Parliamentary Hearing at the United Nations (New York, USA) in February 2022, the 144th IPU Assembly (Bali, Indonesia) in March 2022, and the 145th IPU Assembly (Kigali, Rwanda) in October 2022. Remote interviews took place online from February to May 2022. Three interview responses were submitted in written form. Of the people interviewed, 22% were young persons.

Survey: A survey was issued to IPU Member Parliaments and Permanent Observer organizations in March 2022. Responses were received from 53 parliaments and 1 Permanent Observer organization.

Written input: To supplement the literature available about parliamentary engagement with religion and belief, the report also drew on relevant parliamentary input, such as that recorded in the detailed summary records from the General Debate of the 137th IPU Assembly in St. Petersburg in 2017 on *Promoting cultural pluralism and peace through interfaith and inter-ethnic dialogue*, and on the minutes of the international conference organized in 2018 by the IAO together with the Lebanese National Assembly and in cooperation with the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union on *Unity in diversity and fundamental freedoms for Christians and Muslims in the Middle East: A conference for parliamentary dialogue*. Further input was also provided by the contributions of participants at the workshop held during the 143rd IPU Assembly in Madrid in 2021 on *Good parliamentary practices to promote interfaith dialogue*, the Global Parliamentary Report 2022, and the IPU's open-data platform, Parline.

Consultation and review

Consultations: Two internal consultations were held with members of the IPU Secretariat. The first consultation was held in February 2022 to invite feedback on the research design. The second consultation was held in June 2022 to solicit input about key research outcomes and optimize the design of the final report. Two external consultations were held in May 2022 with researchers and practitioners active in the field of interfaith dialogue and issues impacting religion and belief. These consultations served to provide input into the methodology and process underlying the report.

Review process: The document underwent an internal review process as well as an external peer review from subject matter experts.

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Dr. Sarah Markiewicz led the research for the report. She designed a survey for IPU member parliaments and observer organizations and also conducted interviews with parliamentarians, parliamentary staff, IPU staff and subject matter experts. She was supported in this work by Hafssa Kouskous and Alfonso Carvajal Zuleta. Andy Richardson provided expertise on research, good practice and methodology. Alexander Lowe and Hafssa Kouskous supported with the design and implementation of the survey.

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Participation in the data collection for this report

COUNTRY	INTERVIEWS	SURVEY	COUNTRY	INTERVIEWS	SURVEY
Afghanistan	●		Ethiopia		●
Algeria		●	France	●	
Argentina	●	●	Gambia (The)		●
Australia	●		Georgia	●	
Austria	●	●	Germany		●
Bahrain	●		Ghana	●	●
Bangladesh	●	●	Greece		●
Belarus		●	Guyana	●	
Belgium		●	Hungary		●
Benin	●		India		●
Cambodia		●	Indonesia	●	
Cameroon	●		Ireland	●	
Canada	●	●	Israel	●	
Cabo Verde		●	Japan		●
Chad	●		Jordan		●
Chile		●	Kenya	●	●
Columbia	●		Kuwait		●
Cyprus		●	Latvia		●
Czech Republic		●	Lebanon		●
Denmark		●	Lithuania		●
Egypt	●		Luxembourg		●
Estonia		●	Malaysia	●	●

COUNTRY	INTERVIEWS	SURVEY
Malta	●	
Mexico	●	
Montenegro		●
Morocco	●	
Mozambique		●
Nepal		●
New Zealand	●	
Nicaragua		●
North Macedonia		●
Pakistan		●
Paraguay		●
Poland		●
Portugal	●	
Republic of Korea		●
Republic of Moldova		●
Romania	●	●
Russian Federation	●	●
Rwanda		●
Saudi Arabia	●	
Seychelles		●
Sierra Leone	●	

COUNTRY	INTERVIEWS	SURVEY
Slovenia		●
Spain		●
Sri Lanka	●	
Suriname		●
Sweden		●
Switzerland	●	●
Thailand	●	●
Timor-Leste	●	
Trinidad and Tobago		●
Türkiye	●	
Ukraine	●	
United Arab Emirates	●	
United Kingdom	●	●
United Republic of Tanzania		●
Viet Nam	●	
Zimbabwe	●	
<i>Permanent Observer</i>		
Inter-Parliamentary Assembly on orthodoxy	●	



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