

Submission to Committee on Constitutional Reform: “Movement Toward a Truly Secular Nation”




Introduction







My concerns with the *Constitution* are with following:

1. References to a supreme being and spiritual realm
2. Separation of church and state
3. Blasphemy Laws
4. Discrimination for Officiants in Marriage Ceremonies

My comments are written from a secular perspective to promote a truly secular nation where all belief systems are equal. I am an ordained *Humanist Celebrant* (see my certificate in Appendix A), which is the equivalent of a priest, minister, pastor, rabbi, pundit, or imam. Humanists are atheists who believe in living an ethical life, human rights, and the progress of mankind without reference to the supernatural. Non-believers get married, have children, and die and they need life ceremonies for each event in a secular fashion, in addition to educational and pastoral services. Therefore, while Humanism is not a religion in the traditional sense (with a God), it is a [philosophical creed](#) or way of life and needs to be respected as such.

A fully secular state typically follows principles that ensure the separation of religion from governmental affairs. Here are some common criteria to form a scorecard.

Score	Secular Principles
	Religious Neutrality: The state does not officially endorse, support, or favor any particular religion or religious belief over others. It maintains impartiality in matters of religion. It does not provide privileges to religious organizations (providing property, funding activities, holidays, tax breaks, special biased laws like blasphemy, etc.)
	Freedom of Religion: Citizens have the right to practice any religion or none at all, without discrimination or persecution. This includes the freedom to worship, change one's religion, or express religious beliefs publicly.
	Separation of Church and State: There is a clear distinction between religious institutions and government entities. Religious authorities do not hold official positions in the government, and government policies are not influenced by religious doctrine.

	Equality Before the Law: All citizens, regardless of their religious beliefs or affiliations, are treated equally under the law. Legal decisions are based on secular principles rather than religious doctrine. [Except for Civil Marriage]
	Secular Education: Public education is not influenced by religious teachings or beliefs. Schools teach a secular curriculum, and religious instruction is separate from academic instruction.
	Civil Marriage: Marriage is considered a civil institution rather than a religious sacrament. The state regulates marriage laws and procedures, allowing individuals to marry regardless of their religious affiliations.
	Freedom of Expression: Citizens have the right to criticize or question religious beliefs without fear of persecution. Freedom of speech extends to religious criticism, satire, and dissent. [Blasphemy laws are still on the books]
	Secular Symbols and Holidays: The state uses secular symbols and celebrates secular holidays rather than promoting religious symbols or observances. Public spaces and government institutions remain free from religious iconography.
	Protection of Minority Rights: The state protects the rights of religious minorities and ensures their freedom to practice their beliefs without interference or discrimination from the majority religion or the government.

Trinidad & Tobago violates many of these principles. We are only a quasi-secular state. The Constitution is a secular—not a religious document—meant to reflect and govern all, not just the religious majority.

References to a supreme supernatural being and realm

THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

[1ST AUGUST 1976]

Whereas the People of Trinidad and Tobago—
 (a) have affirmed that the Nation of Trinidad and Tobago is founded upon principles that acknowledge the **supremacy of God**, faith in fundamental human rights and freedoms, the position of the family in a society of free men and free institutions, the dignity of the human person and the equal and inalienable rights with which all members of the human family are

endowed by their Creator;

(d) recognise that men and institutions remain free only when freedom is founded upon respect for moral and spiritual values and the rule of law;

Examining the trends in the T&T Census, the non-believers (counted as “None/Not Stated”) are the fastest-growing “religious” segment of the population. From 2000 to 2011 this group grew **867%**, which is much more than any other category! (See Appendix C). More and more people are failing to find answers or meaning from religion. Why would an all-loving god create a world where suffering and evil could exist, they ask? Now that we have scientific explanations for the cosmos, not everyone continues to believe there is a god, a devil, angels, heaven, witches, and hell and this needs to be respected--they are not ignorant, misguided, or evil. Many of them know the bible better than believers.

To surface the bias, if the passage, “...Trinidad and Tobago is founded upon principles that acknowledge the supremacy of God...” were written as, “...Trinidad and Tobago is founded upon principles that man has created his problems and only man can solve them...” (the Humanist perspective), that would upset a lot of believers. We cannot have discrimination one way or the other. Secularism speaks the language of *neutrality* on belief systems--every group is equal.

This leads to the question: acknowledge the supremacy of which God? There are a lot of Gods that man has created and each has different rules, values, and plans for our lives, which God should be endorsed or followed? What are the implications of God’s rules for public policy and national laws? Should we adopt Mosaic Law, Islamic Sharia Law, Jewish Halakha Law, Hindu Law, or other religious jurisprudence? With this approach, one just opens a quagmire of issues that cannot be resolved.

The statement “...endowed by their Creator” is presented as if it is a fact, but is really a matter of faith or belief. Some religions are very autocratic and none even mention human rights and freedoms in their scriptures--your only right in religion is to obey your version of God.

What are “spiritual values” in point “(d) recognize that men and institutions remain free only when freedom is founded upon respect for moral and spiritual values and the rule of law;”? Whose code of spiritual values are we going to use as different religions stress different values? Besides, moral and spiritual values often overlap heavily, so spiritual values can be considered redundant.

Recommendation: The text of the *Constitution* should be God-neutral like the Spanish, Italian, or US *Constitution* which makes no mention of God. Therefore, strike the phrase “...Trinidad and Tobago is founded upon principles that acknowledge the supremacy of God...”, “endowed by their Creator,” and the phrase “spiritual values.”

Separation of Church & State

The US *Constitution's* First Amendment is "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." The founding fathers realized that mixing the two

always leads to trouble mainly in the area of discrimination. The T&T government gives property, funds, and holidays to certain religious groups with no overall equitable disbursement plan. Some religions feel left out and some feel cheated by the amount of support. To quiet dissenters, politicians call it funding “cultural” activities.

Why should the government use (atheist) taxpayer’s dollars to support religions that purport to worship the almighty who has unlimited wealth? They should get their funds from Him. Humanists believe the money would be much better spent improving our educational, health, and security needs as a society instead of supporting superstition.

Other areas of national concern and identity are the following: the national anthem, the pledge of allegiance, and the national school prayer used in *public* schools. They are packed with references to God (See Appendix B). These items reflect the national identity and therefore a secular nation should be religion/God-neutral so as not to offend anyone and be all-inclusive.

Recommendations:

Area/Item	Recommended Text (or its equivalent)
General Separation of Church & State	“The government will not create any law, regulation, or policy endorsing or prohibiting any religion or its practice.”
Prayers in Public	“The government shall not permit prayers, other religious activities, or promotions (religious symbols) at public schools, or public functions including National Day of Prayer or its equivalent.”
Religious Instruction	“It shall not fund or permit religious instruction in public schools but only allow comparative religions/philosophies as a subject of study--not worship or indoctrination.”
National Anthem & Pledge of Allegiance	“The wording of the National Anthem and Pledge of Allegiance should be God-neutral.” [we pledge allegiance to a <i>country</i> --not a God]
Church Privileges	“The government shall not provide any funds, property or additional holidays for any church, including tax-free privileges not enjoyed by other non-profit organizations and they must comply with the <i>Act’s</i> requirements for transparency, accountability, and proper governance.”

The reason you have to spell it out in the *Constitution* is that few politicians even know what a secular state fully means.

Blasphemy Laws

Blasphemy is defined as: “the act of insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence for God.” *Disbelief* is included in this definition. There are two laws still on the T&T books, one from 1844 and the latter in 2000 (read: blasphemy has not gone away in modern times).

<p>Trinidad and Tobago Criminal Offenses Act 1844, as amended Article 5</p>	<p>The Miscellaneous Offenses Act 2000, added a new offence to the Summary Offences Act. Article 96A</p>
<p>Stipulates that any person who is convicted of any act or an attempt to commit “<i>blasphemy, writing and publishing, or printing and publishing, any blasphemous libel . . . is liable to a fine and to imprisonment for two years.</i>”</p>	<p>“<i>Notwithstanding any other law to the contrary, any person who brings into contempt or disbelief or who attacks, ridicules or vilifies another person’s religion in a manner that is likely to provoke a breach of the peace commits an offence and is liable on summary conviction to a fine of one thousand dollars.</i>”</p> <p>Effectively inserting an additional <i>de facto</i> blasphemy law into the national legislative framework.</p>

While the laws have not been enforced, they are a roadblock to secularity in principle and make the country look archaic in this aspect. Note the word “disbelief” in the 2000 law. It implies it is a crime not to believe in God and comes into conflict with our freedom of conscience and speech in Section 4 (h) and (i) below.

RIGHTS ENSHRINED

4. It is hereby recognised and declared that in Trinidad and Tobago there have existed and shall continue to exist, without discrimination by reason of race, origin, colour, religion or sex, the following fundamental human rights and freedoms, namely:...

(h) freedom of conscience and religious belief and observance;

(i) freedom of thought and expression;

Recommendation: Add text or its equivalent: “The government shall make no laws in enforcing religious beliefs by way of blasphemy or other means.”

Discrimination for Officiants in Marriage Ceremonies

Instead of passing ordinances for each religious group (with the assumption that marriage is a religious sacrament) on who can legally perform marriages here, which discriminates against not only secular, but many religious groups not mentioned in the Acts, violates the national anthem that states, “Every creed and race find an equal place.” As a Humanist Celebrant, I can legally marry a couple in the United States but do not have that privilege here. Further, all religions discriminate in favor of opposite-sex marriages, which is technically against the Constitution (Chapter 1 Section 4). Humanists believe that the LGBTQ+ community is a legitimate group of citizens and we provide marriage ceremonies for them. I am sure you will hear from them on this matter in their submissions to you.

The *Marriage Act* (1923, p. 6) states that only Christian ministers can perform marriages. Three other separate *Marriage Acts* were created to address Hindus (1945), Muslims (1961), and Orisa's (1999) religions. While civil marriages are permitted, they must be performed by a Marriage Officer, Warden, or the Registrar General.

Under these laws atheists, agnostics, Humanists, freethinkers, and other non-believers are not recognized as a religion (or philosophy, way of life, or creed) by the state, and therefore, cannot become marriage officers. This is a form of discrimination (see *Constitution*, Chapter 1, Section 4) making us second-class citizens who do not enjoy equal rights under the law. Only those who believe in God can marry couples, others are relegated to a 5-minute marriage in the Red House by a public officer.

Recommendation: Add text stating the following or its equivalent: "All religions or creeds that are established internationally, whether they recognize a god or not, and have a process for ordaining their clergy or equivalent, shall enjoy the right to legally perform marriage ceremonies for either opposite or same-sex couples without the stipulation of any Act being necessary."

APPENDIX

APPENDIX – A *Humanist Celebrant Certificate*



APPENDIX – B Content of National Watchwords

Item	Content
<p>National Pledge of Allegiance</p>	<p><i>I solemnly pledge to dedicate my life To the service of God And to my country.</i></p> <p><i>I will honour my parents, My teachers, my leaders and my elders, And those in authority</i></p> <p><i>I will be clean and honest in all my thoughts, My words and my deeds.</i></p> <p><i>I will strive, in everything I do To work together with my fellowmen Of every creed and race For the greater happiness of all And the honour and glory Of my country</i></p>
<p>National Anthem</p>	<p><i>Forged from the Love of Liberty, In the fires of Hope and Prayer, With boundless Faith in Our Destiny, We solemnly declare, Side by side we stand Islands of the blue Caribbean Sea, This Our Native Land, We pledge our lives to Thee, Here every creed and race find an equal place, And may God - Bless Our Nation, Here every creed and race find an equal place, And may God - Bless Our Nation.</i></p>
<p>National School Prayer (including public schools)</p>	<p><i>Praise be to you Almighty God, Creator of the Universe and all that is in it.</i></p> <p><i>We thank You, O Father, for the opportunity which You are giving us to increase our knowledge.</i></p> <p><i>May your divine grace enable us to study hard and Use what we learn for the good of our fellow citizens</i></p> <p><i>We pray that you will free us from selfishness, lust, Greed, anger and hatred.</i></p> <p><i>Warm our hearts with Love, fill our minds with understanding and Strengthen our wills in the face of all difficulties.</i></p> <p><i>Help us, O Father, to make our beloved country, of Trinidad and Tobago, the kind of place you want it To be</i></p>

	<p><i>A place where human dignity is respected, Where equal rights are accorded to all citizens, Where hard work is encouraged and rewarded And where You, O God, reign supreme.</i></p>
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APPENDIX – C *Emerging Trends in National Religious Affiliations*

There is a growing segment of the population that does not practice religion or believe in God. The 2011 Census shows a **33%** increase in both categories of “NONE” (as in *none* of the above list of religions), and **867%** increase in “NOT STATED,” over the 2000 Census. As a percent of the population, those two categories combined would constitute the third largest group in T&T:

1. Catholics (20%)
2. Hindus (17%)
3. None/Not Stated (12%)
4. Pentecostal/Evangelical (11%)
5. The balance of groups are all in single digits (charts shown below), but Christians collectively are around 63%

In the past few decades, there has been a growing number of people who have moved away from organized religion, as a place where they can find their philosophy of life and guidance, yet like all humans, they get married, have children, and need memorial services for loved ones. If organized religion is not providing this service for them, who will?

First, we examine the Census data over the decades to see the rise of secular people in our population. While the categories on the Census form are not very explicit about non-religious groups, we can still draw some tentative conclusions from the data. First is the two [Table 4N's](#) comparing religious groups from 1891 to 1970, the first in numbers and the second table in percentages.

TABLE 4N. PRINCIPAL RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS, 1891–1970

Denomination	1891	1901	1911	1921	1931*	1946	1960	1970
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Roman Catholic ...	73,766	89,213	106,113	121,403	142,862	192,500	299,627	331,733
Anglican ...	55,767	74,920	90,045	96,029	101,724	135,312	175,044	168,521
Presbyterian ...	3,382	5,859	8,562	10,772	14,263	20,128	32,413	39,363
Methodist ...	10,502	10,388	12,383	12,477	13,257	14,048	18,220	15,507
Moravian ...	5,835	6,321	7,069	6,775	6,618	7,152	7,309	6,527
Seventh Day Adventist ...	..	..	886	1,681	3,400	6,816	12,631	N.A.
Other Christian ...	4,080	5,634	6,759	8,778	13,111	19,139	38,044	N.A.
Hindu ...	55,191	68,906	85,087	88,300	93,889	126,345	190,424	230,097
Muslim ...	8,638	11,478	14,957	17,698	20,992	32,615	49,736	58,252
Other non-Christian ...	551	414	1,266	1,532	2,016	1,256	233	N.A.
No Religion ...	669	766	425	468	620	1,977) 682)	4,276	N.A. N.A.
All Other ...	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	81,071
Total ...	218,381	273,899	333,552	365,913	412,783	557,970	827,957	931,071

TABLE 4N. PRINCIPAL RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS, 1891–1970—Continued

Denomination	Proportion per cent							
	1891	1901	1911	1921	1931*	1946	1960	1970
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Roman Catholic ...	33.78	32.57	31.81	33.18	34.61	34.50	36.19	35.63
Anglican ...	25.54	27.35	26.99	26.24	24.64	24.25	21.14	18.10
Presbyterian ...	1.55	2.14	2.57	2.95	3.46	3.61	3.91	4.23
Methodist ...	4.81	4.16	3.71	3.40	3.21	2.52	2.20	1.67
Moravian ...	2.67	2.31	2.12	1.85	1.61	1.28	0.88	0.70
Seventh Day Adventist ...	..	..	0.27	0.46	0.82	1.22	1.53	N.A.
Other Christian ...	1.87	2.05	2.03	2.40	3.18	3.44	4.59	N.A.
Hindu ...	25.27	25.16	25.51	24.13	22.74	22.64	23.90	24.71
Muslim ...	3.95	3.83	4.48	4.84	5.09	5.84	6.01	6.26
Other non-Christian ...	0.25	0.15	0.38	0.42	0.49	0.23	0.03	N.A.
No Religion ...	..	..	..	..	..	0.35	0.52	N.A.
Not Stated ...	0.31	0.28	0.13	0.13	0.15	0.12	..	N.A.
All Other ...	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	8.71
All Religions ...	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

*Figures are quoted from page 17 of the 1931 Census Report. They do not tally exactly with those in the General Abstract D on page 20A of the same report, which are quoted in Table D hereof, nor yet with those in Table D on pages 348–51, which makes the total of Hindus 94,010, Muslims 21,290 and other non-Christians 1,596.

Source: West Indian Census 1946 Part G, Chapter VI.

One can note that “No Religion” captures those who do not identify with an established organized religion, but some of them may still believe in God. So this group could comprise of theists, New Age beliefs, agnostics, and atheists. “Not Stated” could also capture these same constituents. Remember that historically, not belonging to a religion was a sign that you rejected God or were immoral, so it had a bad societal connotation and carried a stigma. So, until very recently, not too many people would

want to come right out and say, “No Religion.” This group remained under 1,000 until after World War II, but in the 1960s took a significant jump upwards, but we could still infer that 99% of Trinbagonians were religious, and therefore, believed in God at that time.

The 1980 Census was taken but its report is not publicly available. In [Table 2.6](#) (page 32) below there is comparative data for 1990 and 2000 Census. The “None” category grew from 1.3% to 2.2%, which represents a 69% increase.

Religious Affiliation	1990	2000			1990 Percent	2000 Percent			Ranking	
		Males	Females	Total		Males	Females	Total	1990	2000
Anglican	134,625	50,743	48,078	98,821	12.0	4.6	4.3	8.9	3	3
Baptist	36,937	42,064	48,955	91,019	3.3	3.8	4.4	8.2	8	4
Hindu	292,786	146,332	139,185	285,517	26.0	13.1	12.5	25.6	2	2
Jehovah Witness	16,131	8,875	11,576	20,451	1.4	0.8	1.0	1.8	9	10
Methodist	14,745	5,782	6,057	11,839	1.3	0.5	0.5	1.1	11	11
Muslim	74,262	38,443	35,158	73,601	6.6	3.4	3.2	6.6	5	6
Pentecostal	92,171	40,259	46,690	86,949	8.2	3.6	4.2	7.8	4	5
Presbyterian	40,282	20,512	21,296	41,808	3.6	1.8	1.9	3.8	7	8
Roman Catholic	362,534	163,671	166,249	329,920	32.2	14.7	14.9	29.6	1	1
SDA	45,645	23,606	26,681	50,287	4.1	2.1	2.4	4.5	6	7
None	15,011	15,823	8,737	24,560	1.3	1.4	0.8	2.2	10	9
Total	1,125,129	556,110	558,662	1,114,772	100	49.9	50.1	100		

Note: a). For comparability, "Other" and "Not stated" Categories were emerged and prorated. b). The 2000 distribution was based on tabulable households and not the total population. c) Highest rank 1, second highest 2, etc.

There was no Census for 2020/21, so the last Census in 2011 with data is shown in [Table 1.7](#) (page 17) and compares it with the 2020 Census figures. Note that the “None/Not Stated” categories combined now comprise **12%**, which is **the third largest group** after Catholics (20%) and Hindus (17%) in 2011, which in terms of numbers is 175,640 people. The “None” category increased by **33.5%** and the “Not Stated” by an astonishing **867%**!

Table 1.7:
Religious Composition, 2011, 2000: Trinidad and Tobago

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO	2011	2000	% Change
Anglican	74994	86792	-13.6
Baptist	90953	79899	13.8
Hinduism	240100	250760	-4.3
Islam	65705	64648	1.6
Jehovah's Witness	19450	17948	8.4
Methodist	8648	10396	-16.8
Pentecostal/ Evangelical/ Full Gospel	159033	76327	108.4
Presbyterian/ Congregational	32972	36710	-10.2
Roman Catholic	285671	289711	-1.4
Seventh Day Adventist	54156	44147	22.7
Other	115225	120666	-4.5
None	28842	21598	33.5
Not Stated	146798	15170	867.7

It clear that there is a growing segment of the population that does not practice religion or believe in God. Add to that, that many who *do* identify with a religion, may not actually believe in God but see it as the [cultural system](#) they were raised in and comfortable with (they like the rituals but do not adhere to the beliefs). So given how the data is currently collected, it is impossible to determine the size of the different constituents in the "None/Not Stated segment." One thing that is clear is that the societal environment is much different than it was in the early 70s.

One may ask, when people leave organized religion, where do they go? Maybe they do not need to hear a sermon every Sunday (or whatever day is the holy day for a given religion), but these people get married, have kids, and eventually pass on. How will they celebrate/commemorate these important live events? So, the definition of religion is--in part--addressing those needs, even if in a secular manner as creed.

Humanists could be the single largest category of **organized** non-believers carrying out those functions and services. A lot has changed since the early 70's, and *these people can no longer be ignored*, at this rate they may surpass religious groups perhaps in a generation.

