

ICELAND 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution guarantees the freedom of religion and protects the right to form religious associations. It names Lutheranism the state religion and the state provides the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) with financial support and benefits not available to other religious groups. One application for the registration of a secular humanist organization remained pending at the Ministry of the Interior (MOI).

An online poll on public attitudes toward the construction of houses of worship showed 42.4 percent of respondents opposed the erection of a mosque, while 33.1 percent opposed building a Russian Orthodox church, 23.5 percent were against building a Buddhist temple, and 11.1 percent against the construction of a pagan temple. The Forum for Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation sponsored programs to strengthen dialogue between religious groups and secular philosophical organizations.

U.S. embassy officials maintained regular contact with representatives of religious groups to discuss religious freedom, including outreach to the Muslim community, the Jewish community, and the Icelandic Asatru Association. Embassy officers also regularly engaged with government officials, who agreed on the importance of respecting religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 317,000 (July 2014 estimate). Approximately 75 percent of the population belongs to the ELC, and 5.8 percent belongs to Lutheran Free Churches. Approximately 7.4 percent of the population belongs to 39 small recognized and registered religious and secular humanist groups. The largest is the Roman Catholic Church with 3.6 percent of the population. Approximately 6.4 percent belongs to other or unspecified religious and secular humanist groups, and 5.3 percent do not belong to any religious or secular humanist group. Muslim sources estimate there are 1,000 to 1,500 Muslims. The Jewish community reports there are approximately 100 Jews. Foreigners constitute an estimated 80 percent of the Catholic population, mostly from Poland, other European countries, and the Philippines.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

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Legal Framework

The constitution states all individuals have the right to form religious associations and practice religion in accordance with personal beliefs. As specified in the European Convention on Human Rights, to which the country is a signatory, the constitution bans only religious teachings or practices which are harmful to good morals or the public order, a determination made with reference to the penal code's stipulation that no one may ridicule, slander, insult, threaten, or "otherwise assault" a person or group on account of religion. The government has not had occasion to make such a determination.

The official state religion is Lutheranism. The constitution establishes the ELC as the national church and grants it state support and protection. The state operates a network of Lutheran parish churches throughout the country, and the Lutheran bishop appoints ELC ministers to these parishes. The state directly pays the salaries of the 130 ministers in the national church, who are considered public servants under the MOI. State radio broadcasts Lutheran worship services every Sunday morning as well as daily morning and evening devotions.

The general penal code establishes fines and imprisonment of up to three months for those who publicly deride or belittle the religious doctrines or the worship of a "lawfully existing religious community" active in the country. The general penal code establishes fines and up to two years imprisonment for verbal or physical assault on an individual or group based on religion.

Religious groups and secular humanist organizations apply to the MOI for recognition and registration. By law, a four-member panel reviews the applications. The chairman of the panel is nominated by a university law faculty, and the other three members are nominated by the University of Iceland's Department of Social and Human Sciences, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, and Department of History and Philosophy, respectively. To register, a religious group must "practice a creed or religion" and a secular philosophical organization must operate in accordance with certain ethical values, and "deal with ethics or epistemology in a prescribed manner." Religious groups and secular organizations must also be well established; be active and stable; not have a purpose that "violates the law or is prejudicial to good morals or public order"; and have a core group of members who participate in its operations, support the values

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of the organization in compliance with its teachings, and pay church taxes in accordance with the law.

The law also specifies the leader of a religious group or a secular humanist organization must be at least 25 years old and pay church taxes. Registered religious groups and secular humanist organizations receive state subsidies based on membership numbers. All registered religious groups and secular humanist organizations must submit an annual report to the MOI describing the group's operations over the past year. Religious groups and secular organizations can administer state-sanctioned weddings and preside over the official naming of children as well as administer purely religious ceremonies such as funerals and baptisms. The law places no restrictions or requirements on unregistered religious groups.

The law provides state subsidies to registered religious groups and secular humanist organizations. For each individual 16 years of age and older who belongs to any one of the officially registered and recognized religious groups and secular humanist organizations, the government currently allocates an annual payment of 9,000 kroner (ISK) (\$71) out of income taxes, called the "church tax", to the individual's respective organization.

By law, parents control the affiliation of their children to religious or secular humanist groups until the age of 16. Change in affiliation of children under age 16 requires the consent of both parents if both have custody; if only one parent has custody, the consent of the noncustodial parent is not required. The law requires parents to consult their children about any changes in the child's affiliation after the age of 12.

Virtually all schools are public schools. By law, school grades one through 10 (ages 6-15) in public and private schools must include instruction in social studies, which includes subjects such as Christianity, ethics, and theology. The law also mandates the teaching of "the Christian heritage of Icelandic culture, equality, democratic cooperation, responsibility, concern, forgiveness, and respect for human values." The compulsory curriculum for Christianity, ethics, and theology takes a multicultural approach to religious education and emphasizes teaching a variety of beliefs. Secondary schools teach theology under the social studies rubric along with sociology, philosophy, and history.

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By law, school authorities may exempt pupils from instruction in compulsory subjects such as Christianity, ethics, and theology. To exempt students, parents must submit a written application to the school principal. The principal may request additional information if necessary. For both approved and denied cases, the principal then registers the application as a “special case” and writes an official response to the parents. School authorities are not required to offer other religious or secular instruction in place of these classes.

The Reykjavik City Council prohibits religious and secular humanist groups from conducting any activities, including the distribution of proselytizing material, in municipal preschools and compulsory schools (grades one through 10) during school hours. Reykjavik school administrators can invite the representatives of religious and secular humanist groups to visit classes on religion/life skills as part of the compulsory curriculum. These visits must be under the guidance of a teacher and be in accordance with the curriculum. Any student visits to the gathering places of religious and secular humanist groups during school hours must be under the guidance of a teacher as part of a class on religion and secular humanist views. During these classes, whether they take place away from or at school, students may only observe rituals, but not participate in them.

Government Practices

The MOI received one application for registration from a secular humanist organization, the New Avalon Center, and this application remained pending a decision at year’s end.

The government provided the ELC approximately ISK 4.91 billion (\$38.7 million) in tax revenue and direct subsidies during the year. The ELC operated all cemeteries and all recognized religious groups had equal access to them. The church tax also provided ISK 288 million (\$2.3 million) to the other recognized religious groups.

In April the MOI ruled illegal the 2012 decision by Akureyri school officials to dismiss a grade school teacher after parents of students complained about his personal blog. In the blog, the teacher had highlighted what he considered to be justification in the Bible for his anti-homosexual views. The mayor of Akureyri stated the school dismissed the teacher based on his job performance and not because of his expression of his religious beliefs. The town of Akureyri appealed the MOI’s ruling to the courts.

ICELAND

The police investigation into the case of four individuals, who in 2013 placed several pig heads and spilled red paint on pages of the Quran and on the grass of the site planned for a mosque for the Association of Muslims in Iceland, proved inconclusive and the case was dropped. One of the individuals, Oskar Bjarnason, had previously confessed on a radio program to having participated in the act, calling it “a performance act” to protest construction of a mosque on the site.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

According to one news report, in June Salmann Tamimi, the Deputy Chairman of the Association of Muslims in Iceland, planned to press charges against two individuals who had posted comments to an online story about the prospective construction of a mosque in Reykjavik. In the comments section, the individuals called for Tamimi and other Muslims to be killed. One of the individuals subsequently apologized.

In October the Market and Media Research firm, a well-known strategic market research company, conducted an online survey about public attitudes towards the construction of houses of worship. The firm emailed an invitation to participate in the survey to a portion of its pool of volunteer respondents assembled from the country’s national registry, resulting in responses from 1,436 individuals. The poll showed 42.4 percent of the respondents opposed the erection of a mosque while 29.7 percent were in favor. The same poll registered 33.1 percent of respondents as being against the building of a Russian Orthodox church, while 31 percent approved of it; 23.5 percent disapproved of the building of a Buddhist temple, while 36.5 percent were in favor; and 11.1 percent opposed the construction of a pagan temple, while 49.2 percent approved.

The Forum for Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation conducted monthly meetings and held a symposium called “Faith, Freedom of Expression, and Human Rights” in February. The forum’s membership consisted of a large number of registered religious groups, including Muslim, Buddhist, Protestant, Catholic, and minority Christian groups. Its stated goal was to foster dialogue and strengthen links between religious groups and secular philosophical organizations. Any registered religious group or secular philosophical group could join, as well as unregistered

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religious and secular philosophical groups approved by pre-existing members. The government was a member of the Forum for Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation but did not sponsor programs.

The ELC employed a minister to serve immigrant communities and help recent arrivals of all religious groups integrate into society.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials regularly discussed religious freedom with government officials, nongovernmental organizations, and local leaders representing a broad spectrum of religious groups. The Charge d'Affaires attended an iftar and Ashura celebrations organized by Felag Horizon, a Muslim interfaith group. Embassy officials also met with representatives of other religious organizations, including the Jewish community and the Asatru Association, to discuss the importance the United States places on religious tolerance. Embassy representatives regularly engaged with government officials, who agreed on the importance of respecting religious freedom.