



Finland

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. According to law, the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) and the Orthodox Church are the established state churches.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

There were few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 130,127 square miles and a population of 5,240,000. Approximately 83 percent of the population belongs to the ELC and 1 percent to the Orthodox Church. There are 7 Roman Catholic congregations with an estimated 8,000 registered members, and 2 Jewish congregations with approximately 1,500 members.

Pentecostal church communities registered as associations have an estimated 45,000 members. However, only a fraction of Pentecostal churches are registered, and the actual number of Pentecostal worshippers is higher.

There are approximately 20,000 Muslims, compared with 1,000 a decade ago. Their numbers continue to grow due to immigration and a high birthrate. Of these, approximately 15,000 are Sunni and 5,000 are Shiite. The largest group is Somali; there are also communities of North Africans, Bosnians, peninsula Arabs, Tartars, Turks, and Iraqis. There are four major Muslim organizations: the Muslim Community in Finland, the Tampere Muslim Community, Shi'a Muslims, and the Multicultural Dawa Center of Islam.

Membership in other nonstate religions totals approximately 60,000. An estimated 10 percent of the population does not belong to any religious group.

The rapid modernization of society has modified attitudes toward religion. Society has become more secular, political and social philosophy has diverged from religious philosophy, and religious belief has largely become a private matter. However, research indicates that most citizens still consider religion and spirituality very significant in their lives. Despite the small number of persons who attend church services regularly, citizens have a high regard for the church and its activities, consider their membership important, and still value church ceremonies. Most citizens are baptized and married in the church, confirmation classes are common, and most citizens choose religious burial services.

In the past several decades, as many as 400,000 have left the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC). Reports estimated that 40,000 left the ELC during the reporting period, an increase of 7,000 over the preceding period and an all-time high. Separation from the church has risen markedly since implementation of the Religious Freedom Act of 2003, which made separation much easier. The rate of separation is much higher among younger citizens; in October 2006 a so-called "youth barometer" found that two-thirds of citizens aged 15 to 29 believed in God, but only 40 percent regarded themselves as religious.

In surveys, the most common reason offered for leaving the church was a perceived lack of personal significance of church membership, especially among younger respondents. Some very religious people also left the church, stating that the modern church's message did not meet their deeper spiritual needs. Others said religion was of such a personal nature

that they did not need the church. Approximately 10 percent gave the church tax as their reason for leaving the ELC.

Catholics, Muslims, and Jews, as well as "nontraditional" religious groups, freely professed and propagated their beliefs. Such groups as Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) have been active for decades.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The law provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The law includes the right to profess and practice religion and to express personal belief. Everyone has the right to belong, or decline to belong, to a religious community. The Constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion.

There are two state churches: the ELC and the Orthodox Church. All citizens who belong to either pay a church tax set at 1 to 2 percent of income, varying by congregation, as part of their income tax. Those who do not want to pay the tax must separate from membership. These taxes help defray the cost of running the churches. The state churches record births, deaths, and marriages for members (state registrars do this for other persons).

The Religious Freedom Act of 2003 includes regulations on registered religious communities. To be recognized, a religious group must have at least 20 members, have as its purpose the public practice of religion, and its activities should be guided by a set of rules. The Government recognizes 55 religious groups.

The act allows people to belong to more than one denomination; however, most religious communities do not allow their members to do so.

The religious affiliation of a child does not automatically follow that of a parent. Membership in or resignation from a religious community is always based on a separate expression of the will of the parents/guardians, such as baptism. The denomination of any person older than 12 may be changed only by permission of that person.

Programs available through the Ministries of Education and Labor focus on discrimination, including religious discrimination.

Modest state subsidies were being planned for religious communities and were scheduled to be included in the 2007 state budget. Religious communities must request the funds separately from general tax revenues. The amount of the subsidy would be approximately \$7 (5 euros) per person, although the smallest communities would not qualify for these subsidies.

All public schools provide religious and/or philosophical instruction; students may choose to study either subject. In certain Helsinki area schools, there are more Muslim students than members of the country's second largest religion, Orthodoxy. Countrywide, the number of Muslim students has increased by approximately 20 percent each year over the past 3 years. This trend is expected to continue for at least 2 to 3 years.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

In 2006 the Ministry of Education denied permits to five of seven groups that wished to start or expand private Christian schools. The ministry stated that concern over academic standards was a significant factor in its denials. The Minister of Education also stated that it was not the proper function of schools to promote a single religious truth. The groups in question appealed the ministry's decision, but there was no response by the end of the reporting period.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Anti-Semitism

In March 2007 authorities ordered a man, charged in the district court of Vantaa with selling banned neo-Nazi propaganda by mail order, to be tried in absentia. The original arrest warrant dated from 2003, but the subject had evaded arrest for several years, and the statute of limitations was approaching its end. Shortly afterward the man reappeared and was arrested. At the end of the reporting period, the man was in custody awaiting trial.

In July 2006 the Porvoo district court found the deputy chief editor of the newspaper Uusimaa, an independent paper with a circulation of 13,400, guilty of inciting hatred against an ethnic or religious group. The editor had published a controversial article implying that the Holocaust was desirable. The court fined the editor and paper.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were few reports during the reporting period of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice.

There were no reports of verbal or physical violence directed against persons or property of any minority religious group.

"Nontraditional" religious groups generally were not subject to discrimination, despite the intolerant attitudes of some members of society.

Immigrants did not encounter difficulties in practicing their religious beliefs; however, they sometimes encountered discrimination and xenophobia.

Some citizens were not receptive to proselytizing by adherents of "nontraditional" religious groups, in part because they regarded religion as a private matter.

In March 2007 approximately 90 clergy of the ELC signed a petition supporting two assistant vicars who refused to officiate at a religious service alongside female clergy. The two, from two different parishes, faced disciplinary proceedings for refusing to work with women clerics. Although female clergy have been ordained in the ELC for almost two decades, the issue remained controversial, and such cases periodically arose. Conservative clergy and parishioners remained less comfortable with the full ordination of female ministers.

However, the press strongly supported female clergy and gender equality. The country's largest newspaper, Helsingin Sanomat, wrote that the matter was not an internal issue of the church, but a legal issue of discrimination and gender equality.

Archbishop Jukka Paarma, the head of the ELC, told the Finnish News Agency that he did not approve of the behavior of clergy refusing to officiate alongside their female colleagues.

In 2005 gay marriage was discussed at an ELC conference; however, after the event, the ELC failed to adopt a policy on registered same-sex couples and homosexuality. The conference set up a working group to present findings within a year, but it did not issue a report by the end of the reporting period.

In 2005 two clergy members wrote in a church weekly that they had given blessings in an unofficial capacity to registered gay and lesbian couples. They said it was a matter of conscience and encouraged same-sex couples to seek church blessings.

In May 2005 at a synod of the ELC in Turku, Archbishop Paarma said that single women and lesbian couples should not receive state-funded fertility treatment. He rejected the notion that childbearing was an inherent human right that should be supported by the state in all cases and stressed that the focus should always be on the child's rights when considering in vitro fertilization. In his opinion these rights included the right to have a mother and a father. He said that he did not condemn fertility treatment, calling it a blessing for many married couples.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Embassy representatives periodically met with representatives of religious communities (both mainstream and "nontraditional") to discuss religious freedom issues.

The Ambassador met with a delegation of American and local Orthodox Church leaders to discuss issues of shared

concern, including religious tolerance and ecumenical exchanges.

In October 2006 an embassy officer spoke to the Orthodox Seminary and other religious gatherings on the relationship between church and state in the United States and on the role of American faith-based institutions in charitable assistance. This activity supported an initiative by local Orthodox ecclesiastical leaders to promote tolerance and understanding.

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