



## Finland

### International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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

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

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

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

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 its population is approximately 5.2 million. At the end of 2004, 83.6 percent of the population belonged to the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and one percent belonged to the Orthodox Church. The percentage for the Evangelical Lutheran Church was 84.1 a year earlier. A total of 27,000 people left the Evangelical Lutheran Church, a figure which is virtually the same as the previous year. In 2003, the new Religious Freedom Act simplified procedures for leaving the Church, which has led to an increase in the number of people who do so. Analysts believe that many people who leave the Church do so to avoid paying taxes to support the Church. During 2004, a total of 49,670 children were christened, which accounts for 86 percent of the babies born that year.

Pentecostal Church communities that are registered as associations have approximately 45,000 members. However, only a fraction of Pentecostal Churches are registered, and the actual number of Pentecostal worshippers is probably higher. Various other non-state religions have approximately 60,000 members. An estimated 10 percent of the population does not belong to any religious group. In the past decade, the number of Muslims has grown from 1,000 to approximately 20,000, most of whom are immigrants to the country. Of these, approximately 5,000 are Shiites and 15,000 Sunni. The largest single national group is Somalis, but the communities also include North Africans, Bosnians, peninsula Arabs, Tartars, Turks and Iraqis. There are four major Muslim communities in the country: The Muslim Community in Finland, the Tampere Muslim Community, Shi'a Muslims and the Multicultural Dawa Center of Islam. There are seven Roman Catholic congregations with approximately 8,000 registered members, and two Jewish congregations with 1,513 members.

A Gallup poll, conducted in 2003, showed that locals held a more positive view toward Christian churches and religious groups than in the past. Over one half of those interviewed believed that one was accountable for one's deeds in afterlife. 77 percent held positive views about the Lutheran Church, 65 percent held positive views of the Salvation Army and 62 percent held positive views of the Orthodox Church. A majority of the population held negative views about Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Christian Science, and Islam. People were fairly evenly split on positive and negative perceptions of Judaism.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church conducted a recent study among its employees regarding their religious commitment. Some were surprised that 10 percent of those interviewed were either weakly or not at all committed to the Church doctrines. However, as many as 70 percent of the rest were nonetheless strongly committed. The Archbishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church was satisfied with the results. He stated that any business would be pleased if as many as 9 out of 10 of its employees were committed to the values the company represented.

In 2004, an attendance of nearly 18 million was registered at worship services, christenings, weddings, funerals and other church meetings, e.g. concerts, by the Evangelical Lutheran Church. The congregations have approximately 2,200 choirs and 600 musical bands with a total membership of 44,000. The attraction of Sunday schools has decreased by some ten percent; only 1 child out of 10 in the group of 4 to 10 year-olds attended Sunday school. However, confirmation classes have been the flagship of the Church's youth work, and in 2004 as many as 57,000 youngsters, i.e. some 90 percent of the age group

(approximately 15 years) attended.

In the last few decades the Evangelical Lutheran Church has started to show far greater awareness of its international responsibilities. This is reflected in increased support for missionary work and development assistance, and in a greater interest in ecumenical work. Support for missionary work has doubled since the early 1980s, and the proceeds of church collections for foreign aid have increased many times over.

Nontraditional religious groups freely profess and propagate their beliefs. Such groups as Jehovah's Witnesses and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) have been active in the country for decades. Other groups include the Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish communities.

## **Section II. Status of Religious Freedom**

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. There are two state churches: the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Orthodox Church. All citizens who belong to either state church pay a church tax set at 1 to 2 percent of income, varying with the congregation, as part of their income tax. Those who do not want to pay the tax must inform the applicable state church that they are leaving it. These taxes are used to defray the costs of running the churches. State churches also handle services such as recording births, deaths, and marriages, which for citizens outside these churches are handled by official state registrars. Nontraditional religious groups are eligible for some tax relief (for example, they may receive tax-free donations), provided that they are registered with, and recognized by, the Government as religious communities.

State subsidies are being planned for religious communities. An Education Ministry taskforce was working on a proposal which it was originally supposed to submit in March 2005, but had not by the end of the period covered in this report.. The first subsidies of this kind should be included in the 2007 state budget. The amount of the subsidy would be linked to the number of members of the religious community and be approximately 5 euro (\$7) per person. The smallest communities would not qualify for these subsidies. The funds would have to be applied for separately. Although not of substantial financial significance, the subsidies would nonetheless mean a step toward greater religious equality.

To be recognized, religious groups should have at least 20 members. The purpose of the group should be the public practice of religion, and the activities of the group should be guided by a set of rules. The Government recognizes 55 religious groups.

The new Religious Freedom Act includes regulations on registered religious communities. Their autonomy was increased, and the law on associations is extensively applied to them. As in the old law, a minimum of 20 members is required to form a religious organization. Furthermore, the new law no longer prevents a person from being a member of several religious communities simultaneously. The religious communities will decide independently whether or not their members can belong to other religious communities as well. The one-month reconsideration period and the personal notice of resignation have been abandoned. Resignation can be submitted by mail, and it will take effect immediately upon receipt.

The new law further clarifies that the religious denomination of a child is not automatically determined by the faith of the parents: the child's membership of or resignation from a religious community is always based on a separate expression of the will of the parents/guardians, such as baptizing the child. The independence of the child has been increased so that the denomination of a 12-year old may be changed only by permission of the child.

The Constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion. Various government programs available through the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labor focus on ongoing discrimination, including discrimination based on religion. Studies and research, integration programs, and recommendations for further incorporation of immigrants into society have been the focal points of these programs. Religion has not been highlighted in particular, but remains a part of the Government's overall attempts to combat discrimination.

### **Restrictions on Religious Freedom**

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. There are no reports of verbal or physical violence against persons or property of any minority religious groups.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

### **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.

**Abuses by Terrorist Organizations**

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

**Section III. Societal Attitudes**

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

Some citizens are not very receptive to proselytizing by adherents of nontraditional faiths, in part because of the tendency to regard religion as a private matter.

Nontraditional religious groups are generally free from discrimination despite intolerant attitudes from some members of society.

Immigrants do not encounter difficulties in practicing their faiths; however, they sometimes encounter random discrimination and xenophobia.

An issue raising a fair amount of discussion among the clergy has been whether or not registered couples of the same sex should be given the blessings of the Church. In 2003, the Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church meeting decided to table two opposite proposals: one banning access to Church offices for those living in a registered same-sex relationship, and the other proposing Church blessings for such couples. No decisions about this somewhat controversial issue have yet been made.

Two recent cases serve to illustrate the social liberalism among the general public on the one hand, and the more conservative view of the Church itself on the other. The Lutheran Bishop of Turku resigned in early 2005 following allegations of an extramarital affair. Although the Church hierarchy supported the resignation on moral grounds, the Bishop received significant expressions of sympathy from many ordinary members, and a popular movement collected over 5,000 signatures supporting the Bishop.

Another ongoing case involved a doctoral thesis alleging that the female clergy in the Diocese of Oulu (a conservative area in the north) suffered from discrimination, psychological violence and harassment by the previous bishop, who was opposed to female clergy in principle. Nearly all female ministers in the diocese met with opposition from certain male colleagues and superiors. The harassment reportedly occurred from the late 1980s to the beginning of the 2000s. Most citizens strongly support female clergy.

Another current issue of debate involves state-financed fertility treatments. Lutheran Archbishop Jukka Paarma, who occasionally expresses his views on certain political/moral issues that might also be debated in Parliament, commented on the fertility question in May 2005 at a Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Turku. Paarma said that single women and lesbian couples should not receive state-funded fertility treatment to facilitate conception. Paarma rejected the notion that childbearing was an inherent human right that should be supported by the state in all cases. The Archbishop stressed that the focus should always be on the child's rights when considering in-vitro fertilization treatment. In his opinion, these include the right to have a mother and a father. He also clearly established that he did not condemn fertility treatment, calling it a blessing for many married couples.

State churches often speak out in support of the Finnish/Nordic welfare state model, couching social welfare state values in religious or moral terms. Preaching at the opening of the Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in May 2004, the bishop of Espoo expressed his position on the Kyoto Climate agreement, saying the country should not withdraw from it because of short-term national interests. A senior politician of the Greens immediately commended the Church for taking a stance on an issue that was not directly related to religion, but to the general welfare of people.

**Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

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

The Ambassador met with a delegation of American and Finnish Orthodox Church leaders to discuss issues of shared concern, including religious tolerance, ecumenical exchanges, trafficking-in-persons, and other transnational problems confronting modern societies.

An Embassy officer spoke to the Orthodox Seminary and several 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 was part of an initiative by local Orthodox ecclesiastical leaders to promote tolerance and understanding.

In August 2004, the Embassy hosted an outreach reception for the country's Muslim community. The reception brought together a diverse group of Muslim immigrants representing many different ethnic and religious communities. The aim of the reception

was to promote discussion and debate over the experience of Muslim immigrants in the country and their concerns over religious and political issues both within the country and internationally.

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