



Finland

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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 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 religious groups 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 was approximately 5.2 million. At the end of 2005, 83.1 percent of the population belonged to the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and 1 percent belonged to the Orthodox Church. The percentage for the Evangelical Lutheran Church was 83.6 percent a year earlier. A total of 33,043 people left the Evangelical Lutheran Church, some 6,000 more than in 2004. The number of those who joined the Church increased by 9,559. This figure did not include the 49,443 babies who were baptized, virtually the same number as in 2004.

In the past several decades, as many as 400,000 have left the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

The Research Center of the Lutheran Church asked people who left the Church to give reasons for their decision. The most common reason was that membership was of no significance to them. Younger respondents especially expressed this view. There were also some very religious people who left the Church, stating that the modern Church's message was too watered down and did not meet their deeper spiritual demands.

Other respondents said religion was of such personal nature to them that they did not need the Church to take care of it. Only about 10 percent gave the Church tax as the reason for leaving membership in the Lutheran Evangelical Church.

Pentecostal Church communities that were registered as associations had approximately 45,000 members. However, only a fraction of Pentecostal churches were registered, and the actual number of Pentecostal worshippers was probably higher. Various other non-state religions had approximately 60,000 members. An estimated 10 percent of the population did not belong to any religious group. In the past decade, the number of Muslims increased from 1,000 to approximately 20,000, most of whom were immigrants to the country. Of these, approximately 5,000 were Shiites and 15,000 Sunni. The largest single national group was Somali, but the communities also included North Africans, Bosnians, peninsula Arabs, Tartars, Turks, and Iraqis. There were 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 were seven Roman Catholic congregations with approximately 8,000 registered members, and two Jewish congregations with approximately 1,500 members.

All public schools provide religious and/or philosophical instruction. Students who did not wish to receive religious instruction may choose to study philosophy instead. In certain Helsinki area schools, there were more Muslim students than members of the country's second religion, Orthodoxy. Therefore, in these schools, Islam became the third most popular "philosophical subject" after the Lutheran faith and general "philosophy-of-life." The number of Muslim students increased countrywide by approximately 20 percent every year over the past three years. This trend was expected to continue for at least two to three years.

In 2006, the Ministry of Education denied permits to five out of seven groups that wished to start or expand private Christian schools. The ministry stated that concern over academic standards, particularly in science, was a significant factor in its decision. The minister of education also stated that in his view it was not the proper function of schools to promote a single religious truth. The groups in question have appealed the ministry's decision.

A 2003 Gallup poll showed that Finns held a more positive view toward Christian churches and religious groups than in a similar poll taken in 1999. Over one-half of those interviewed believed that one was accountable in an afterlife for one's deeds. Seventy-seven percent (69 percent in 1999) held positive views about the Lutheran Church, 65 percent (56 percent in 1999) held positive views of the Salvation Army, and 62 percent (51 percent in 1999) 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 counted everyone who entered a church for any reason as an attendee. In 2004, an attendance of nearly 18 million was registered at worship services, christenings, weddings, funerals, concerts, and other church meetings presented by the Church. The congregations had approximately 2,200 choirs and 600 musical bands, with a total membership of 44,000. The attraction of Sunday schools decreased by some 10 percent; only one child out of ten in the group of four- to ten-year-olds attended Sunday school. However, confirmation classes were 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 fifteen years), attended.

In the last few decades the Evangelical Lutheran Church has started to show far greater awareness of its international responsibilities. This was 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 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 in the country for decades. Other groups included 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 respected 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 were being planned for religious communities and were scheduled to be included in the 2007 state budget. The funds would have to be applied for 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. 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 twenty 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 fifty-five religious groups.

The 2003 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 twenty 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 takes 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 in 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 any person older than twelve may be changed only by permission of the person.

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 were 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 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.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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

Some citizens were 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 were generally free from discrimination despite intolerant attitudes from some members of society.

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

There were a few reports of anti-Semitic graffiti; however, there were no reports of significant anti-Semitic activity.

An issue raising some amount of discussion among the clergy was 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 ceremonies for those living in a registered same-sex relationship, and the other proposing church blessings for such couples. No decisions about this issue had been made by the end of the period covered by this report.

The subject of gay marriage was discussed at an Episcopal conference in September 2005; however, after the meeting, the Evangelical Lutheran Church failed to adopt a policy on registered same-sex (de facto married) couples and homosexuality. The conference set up a working group to present findings within a year.

Some registered same-sex couples may have received blessings in an unofficial capacity by some clergy. Two members of the clergy wrote in an article in a church weekly that they had given blessings to gay and lesbian couples. They said it was a matter of conscience and encouraged same-sex couples to seek church blessings. The Evangelical Lutheran Church had no official policy on the matter at the end of the period covered by this report.

Two cases served 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 more than 5,000 signatures supporting him.

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 supported 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.

The organization for sexual equality in Finland (SETA) leveled harsh criticism at the Evangelical Lutheran Synod's stance on forthcoming legislation on fertility treatment. The Government proposed that lesbian couples be eligible for state-funded fertility treatment. The church opposed the plan.

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 met 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 March 2006, 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 freedom and political issues both within the country and internationally.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)