



Finland

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

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

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. According to law, the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) and the Orthodox Church are the established state churches.

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom 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 5.3 million. Approximately 83 percent of the population belongs to the ELC and 1 percent to the Orthodox Church. There are seven Roman Catholic congregations with an estimated 8,000 registered members, and two Jewish congregations with approximately 1,500 members.

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

There are approximately 30,000 Muslims, compared with 1,000 a dozen years ago. Their numbers continue to grow due to immigration and a high birthrate. Of these, approximately 20,000 are Sunni and 10,000 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 religious groups 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. Research indicates, however, 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, approximately the same number as in the previous year. 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 "youth barometer" poll found that two-thirds of citizens ages 15 to 29 believed in God, but only 40 percent regarded themselves as religious.

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 other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors. 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.

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 with his or her consent.

There are two state churches: the ELC and the Orthodox Church. All citizens who belong to either pay a church tax set at one to two 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 Government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Epiphany, Good Friday, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and Second Day of Christmas.

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 be guided in its activities by a set of rules. The Government recognizes 55 religious groups.

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

In 2008, for the first time, registered religious communities other than the ELC and the Orthodox Church became eligible to receive state funds. Legislation passed in late 2007 provides that communities with 200 or more members may receive from the annual government budget a statutory subsidy calculated at approximately \$5.40 (€3.40) per member. Twenty-two communities with a total membership of 58,800 qualified by the end of the reporting period.

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

As of January 2008, the local Union of Conscientious Objectors reported that 11 conscientious objectors were in prison. The Ministry of Defense stated that between five and ten persons annually refuse both military service and alternative civilian service. They serve prison terms of 181 days -- the legal maximum, lowered from 197 days previously, and equal to one-half the 362 days of alternative civilian service (which had been lowered from 395 days on January 1, 2008). Regular military service varies between 180 and 362 days. Some of those imprisoned stated that their objection to performing compulsory military or civilian service was based on religious conviction. Jehovah's Witnesses are specifically exempt from service.

There was no evidence that the Government singled out individuals for prosecution because of their religious beliefs or membership in a religious minority.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

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

There were no reports during the reporting period of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. There were no reports of anti-Semitic incidents.

"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.

The dispute between the ELC leadership and those of its clergy who refused to cooperate with female ministers continued. As head of the ELC, the archbishop insisted that all clergy ordained by the Church must accept the rules adopted by the Church that permit women to be ordained and serve as ministers.

At the end of the reporting period, a man remained in custody awaiting trial since being charged in March 2007 in the district court of Vantaa with selling banned neo-Nazi propaganda by mail order.

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom 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.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)

