



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Iceland

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice; however, the state financially supports and promotes Lutheranism as the country's official religion.

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 Evangelical Lutheran Church, which is the state church, enjoys some advantages not available to other faiths in the country and provides social services regardless of creed.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom, and there have been no reports of religious persecution.

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 39,600 square miles, and a population of approximately 300,000. Most residents lived on or near the coasts. The area surrounding the capital, Reykjavik, was home to approximately 60 percent of the country's total population.

According to the National Statistical Bureau, 251,728 persons (84.1 percent of the total population) were members of the state Lutheran Church. During the reporting period, a total of 1,065 individuals resigned from the Church, as against 214 new registrants other than infants baptized. Many of those who resigned from the state Church joined one of the structurally and financially independent Lutheran Free Churches, which had a total membership of 13,816 persons (4.6 percent of the population). The breakdown in membership was as follows: Reykjavik Free Church-6,597; Hafnarfjordur Free Church- 4,566; and Reykjavik Independent Church-2,653. A total of 14,687 individuals (4.9 percent) were members of 23 other small recognized and registered religious organizations ranging from the Roman Catholic Church (6,451 members) to the First Baptist Church (14 members). There were 11,794 individuals (3.9 percent) who belonged to other or nonspecified religious organizations and 7,379 (2.5 percent) who were not part of any religious organization. There were also religions, such as Judaism, that have been practiced in the country for years but have never requested official recognition. In official statistics, these religions are listed as "other and unspecified." The National Statistical Bureau does not keep track of Jewish community numbers, and there is no synagogue or Jewish cultural center; however, up to sixty people attended occasional Jewish holiday parties and themed lectures and discussions organized by a few Jewish immigrants. A number of academic studies reported that between 16 and 23 percent of the population identified itself either as atheist or agnostic.

Although the majority of citizens used traditional Lutheran rituals to mark events such as baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals, most Lutherans did not regularly attend Sunday services.

A 2005 Gallup poll showed that about two-thirds of Icelanders believed in some kind of existence after death.

According to statistics provided by the immigration authorities, the number of foreigners receiving a residence permit increased significantly during the past several years. In direct relation to the increase in foreigners (itinerant workers, immigrants, and refugees), the number of religious organizations significantly increased. Foreigners comprised more than half of the Roman Catholic population. The Reykjavik Catholic Church held one service each week in English, and many Filipinos attended. A growing number of Catholic Poles lived in the country, where they worked in the fishing and shipbuilding industries. Three Polish priests served the Polish Catholic community. The Catholic Church also employed priests from Argentina, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Slovakia. Since there were few Catholic churches outside of Reykjavik, Lutheran ministers regularly lent their churches to Catholic priests so that they could conduct Masses for members in rural areas.

The Association of Muslims in Iceland (Felag Muslima a Islandi), founded in 1997, had 341 members (out of approximately 800 to 1000 Muslims living in the country, according to the Association). Muslims were mostly concentrated in the capital area, although there were a number of Kosovar Muslim refugees in the small northern town of Dalvik. Since 2002, the community has had its own house of worship, with daily prayer nights and weekly Friday prayers that attracted a core group of approximately thirty individuals. A 2000 application for land to build a mosque languished in Reykjavik's planning commission. The city cited competing claims for the land in question, but some observers expressed concern that prejudice was behind the delay.

The Russian Orthodox Church applied for land to build a house of worship in Reykjavik and also experienced frustrating bureaucratic delays.

City officials publicly expressed concern that tensions could arise if the Muslims and Orthodox Christians were to erect neighboring facilities, as they have been looking at the same site. While there were acknowledged tensions, occasionally leading to arguments, between Reykjavik's small Muslim Kosovar and Orthodox Serb communities, religious leaders told authorities they had no qualms about worshipping in close proximity.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) accounted for the only significant foreign missionary activity in the country. The U.S.-based First Baptist Church of Iceland in Keflavik, which primarily served U.S. military personnel at Naval Air Station Keflavik (NASKEF), was planning to strengthen its outreach to the broader Icelandic community when NASKEF closed in late 2006.

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. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. The official state religion is Lutheranism.

The constitution provides all persons the right to form religious associations and to practice religion in accordance with their personal beliefs. It also bans teaching or practices harmful to good morals or public order. In addition, the General Penal Code protects religious practice by establishing fines and imprisonment for up to three months for those who publicly deride or belittle the religious doctrines or worship of a lawful religious association active in the country.

Article 62 of the constitution establishes the Evangelical Lutheran Church as the state church and pledges the state's support and protection. Parliament has the power to pass a law to change this article. Although Gallup polls show that the majority of citizens favor the concept of separation of church and state, most probably would not support the change if it meant closing Lutheran churches because of lack of funding. According to the state church's website, "9 out of 10 children are baptized in their first year, more than 90 percent of adolescents are confirmed, 75 percent are married in the church and 99 percent are buried in the church." Although few citizens regularly attend services, they see the Lutheran religion as part of their culture and view the closing of a church as losing a part of their heritage. In October 2004, the Alliance Party presented a parliamentary motion on constitutional amendments that included a clause calling for consideration of the separation of church and state. The initiative has not made it out of committee. Sidmennt, the 188-member Icelandic Ethical Humanist Association, strongly supports legislation to separate church and state. An October 2005 Gallup poll found two-thirds of the general population, led by men, capital-area residents, and younger, wealthier, better educated people, in favor of separation.

The state directly pays the salaries of the 140 ministers in the state church, and these ministers are considered public servants under the Ministry of Judicial and Ecclesiastical Affairs. These ministers counsel persons of all faiths and offer ecumenical services for marriages and funerals. The state operates a network of Lutheran parish churches throughout the country. In new housing areas, land automatically is set aside for the construction of a parish church to serve the neighborhood. State radio broadcasts worship services every Sunday morning and daily devotions morning and night, contributing to state Lutheran domination of the public space.

A 1999 law sets specific conditions and procedures that religious organizations must follow to gain state subsidies. All taxpayers sixteen years of age and older must pay a church tax amounting to approximately \$121 (ISK 8,472) a year. Individuals are free to direct their church tax payments to any of the religious groups officially registered and recognized by the state. For persons who are not registered as belonging to a religious organization, or who belong to one that is not registered, the tax payment goes to the University of Iceland, a secular institution. Atheists have objected to having their fee go to the university, asserting that this is inconsistent with the constitutional right of freedom of association.

During the period covered by this report, the Government gave the state church approximately \$61.4 million (ISK 4.3 billion). Of that amount, the church tax funded \$22.9 million (ISK 1.6 billion), the cemetery tax \$10.7 million (ISK 749.5 million), and general revenues \$27.1 million (ISK 1.9 billion). The state church operates all cemeteries in the country, and the \$10.7 million from the cemetery tax must be used solely for this purpose. All recognized religious denominations have equal access to the country's cemeteries. The church tax also provided a total of \$2.4 million (ISK 170 million) to the other recognized religions and a total of \$1.5 million (ISK 108 million) to the University of Iceland.

In January 2006, the Icelandic Pagan Association (Asaturfelagith) sued the Ministry of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs and the Ministry of Finance to receive funding proportional to its membership from monies currently made available only to the state church. These monies supplement the income that the National Church receives from church taxes, exclusively favoring state Lutheranism in violation of Article 14 of the European Convention of Human Rights, according to the plaintiff. The case was scheduled to go to trial on September 18, 2006.

The Ministry of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs handles applications for recognition and registration of religious organizations. The law provides for a three-member panel consisting of a theologian, a lawyer, and a social scientist to review the applications. To become registered, a religious organization must, according to Law Number 108/1999, "practice a creed or religion that can be linked to the religions of humankind that have historical or cultural roots...be well established...be active and stable...have a core group of members who regularly practice the religion in compliance with its teachings and should pay church taxes...." All registered religious organizations are required to submit an annual report to the Ministry of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs describing the organization's operations over the past year. The law also specifies that the leader of a religious organization must be at least twenty-five years old and pay taxes in the country. No restrictions or requirements are placed on unregistered religious organizations, which have the same rights as other groups in society. Of three groups that applied to register as religious organizations during the reporting period, one, an offshoot of the Icelandic Pagan Association, gained official recognition. The Free Church of Iceland and the Baptist Church of Sudurnes had their applications denied on grounds of not being sufficiently well established.

Law Number 108/1999 confirms that parents control the religious affiliation of their children until the children reach the age of sixteen. However, the Children's Act requires that parents consult their children about any changes in the children's affiliation after the age of twelve, and the National Registry confirms that such changes do take place with the requesting children's signatures. In the absence of specific instructions to the contrary, children at birth are assumed to have the same religious affiliation as their mother and are registered as such.

Under Law Number 66/1995, which regulates public elementary schools, the Government requires instruction in Christianity, ethics, and theology during the period of compulsory education; that is, ages six through sixteen. Virtually all schools are public schools, with a few exceptions such as a Roman Catholic parochial school located in Reykjavik. All schools are subject to Law Number 66 with respect to the compulsory curriculum. However, the precise content of this instruction can vary, and some observers have claimed that religious indoctrination can take place, as the curriculum is not rigid and as teachers often are given wide latitude in the classroom. Some teachers place greater emphasis on ethical and philosophical issues rather than on specifically religious instruction. Lessons on non-Christian religions are part of the curriculum, but teachers ultimately teach mostly about Christianity. The rationale behind the focus on Christianity in religious instruction is based on the creed's historically strong influence on the country's society and culture.

Students may be exempted from Christianity classes. The law provides the minister of education with the formal authority to exempt pupils from instruction in compulsory subjects such as Christianity. In practice, individual school authorities issue exemptions informally. There is no obligation for school authorities to offer other religious or secular instruction in place of Christianity classes.

In December 2005, the Ministry of Education published proposals for a new curriculum for Christianity, ethics, and religious studies in primary schools. The proposals suggested a more multicultural and intellectual approach to religious education and a greater emphasis on teaching a variety of beliefs rather than a single faith. The Ministry of Education was expected to implement the proposals in late 2006. In secondary schools, theology would continue to be taught under the rubric of "community studies" along with sociology, philosophy, and history.

In the 2005-2006 school year, some secondary schools adopted a new Icelandic textbook on world religions. Minority religious organizations, while praising the book's comprehensive coverage, criticized the volume for inaccuracies in its discussion of non-Christian faiths and for describing atheism as a religion. Observers also criticized a secondary school history textbook for a number of errors regarding Islam. For example, a picture of the Dome of the Rock, the third holiest place in Islam, located in Jerusalem's Old City, is wrongly captioned as the second holiest place in Islam, located in downtown Jerusalem.

The Government does not actively promote interfaith understanding. The Government does not sponsor programs or official church-government councils to coordinate interfaith dialogue, but many church groups sponsor meetings between the leaders of the various religious organizations. A Japanese-born minister of the state church has been designated to serve the immigrant community and help recent arrivals of all faiths integrate into society. Holocaust education is not a required element of the national school program, but the subject is taught in most schools as part of a mandatory history curriculum.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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

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

There were no reports of physical violence against Jews or acts of violence against, or vandalism of, Jewish community institutions, of which there are none. Incidents of harassment were rare.

When an Israeli border guard delayed and insulted First Lady Dorrit Moussaieff, of Jewish descent and born in Israel, on her departure from that country following a private visit, Moussaieff remarked that the border guard's behavior was the type that led to anti-Semitism. Subsequent broad coverage in the press focused on the First Lady's loss of composure but did not analyze or criticize the statement. A major daily newspaper caricatured the affair in a cartoon showing Moussaieff leading her husband, President Olafur Ragnar Grimsson (portrayed as preparing himself for a fistfight) toward a group of grim-faced Jews—stereotypically rendered with hats, beards, and prominent noses—waiting behind the Western ("Wailing") Wall. The caption read, "Give the damn Jews a good beating, dear Oli." The cartoonist's main aim appears to have been to mock the president—who has not publicly commented on the incident—for subservience to his wife.

Harassment of the country's tiny, inconspicuous Jewish community is infrequent and not organized.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. If members of religious minorities face discrimination, it is indirect in nature, taking the form of prejudice and lack of interfaith or intercultural understanding. The country has a small, close-knit, homogenous society that closely guards its culture and is not accustomed to accommodating outsiders. Although most

citizens are not active members of the state church, Lutheranism is still an important part of the country's cultural identity. There were reports of isolated incidents involving inebriated individuals verbally harassing veiled Muslim women on the streets of Reykjavik.

Muslims in the country, seconded by independent observers, have expressed concern that Omega, a Christian television station, broadcasts distorted, negative coverage and commentary on Muslims and Islam. The station's broadcasting area includes Southwest and South Iceland, reaching approximately 75 percent of the country's population. Since June 2002, Omega also broadcast its programming via satellite to continental Europe, the Middle East, and Northern Africa, claiming to reach approximately 45 million homes.

During the last decade, there has been increased awareness of other religious groups, and informal interfaith meetings, seminars, and courses have been held. In May 2005, the National Church for the first time organized an interfaith meeting of the leaders of major registered religious groups (defined as those with 150 or more members). Attendees planned to establish a permanent Interfaith Forum in mid-2006 that would foster dialogue and strengthen links between religious groups. A position paper completed by participants in early 2006 stated that the forum is intended to encourage honest debate on issues of common interest; to fight prejudice and discrimination; to emphasize the social value of religion; and to encourage greater professionalism in the teaching of religion in public schools. The position paper was subject to the nascent organization's formal approval at the end of the period covered by this report.

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. The embassy also maintains a regular dialogue on religious freedom issues with the leaders of various religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In November 2005, the charge d'affaires invited members of the Muslim community, as well as state church officials, NGO immigrant service providers, journalists, and embassy staff with experience in the Muslim world to the ambassador's residence for an Iftar-style meal to celebrate religious diversity and demonstrate Americans' respect for Islam and religious freedom.

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