



## Iceland

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **International Religious Freedom Report 2009**

**October 26, 2009**

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Government generally respected religious freedom 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 by the Government during the reporting period. The Evangelical Lutheran Church, which is the state church, enjoys some advantages not available to other religious groups. The church provides social services regardless of creed.

There were isolated 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 39,600 square miles and a population of 320,000. Reykjavik and its environs are home to approximately 60 percent of the population.

According to the National Statistical Bureau, 252,948 persons (79 percent of the population) are members of the state Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC). In 2008, 1,453 individuals resigned from the Church, while the Church baptized 223 new registrants other than infants. Many of those who resigned joined one of the organizationally and financially independent Lutheran Free Churches, which have a total membership of 15,999 (5 percent of the population). A total of 18,818 persons (5.9 percent) are members of 27 other small recognized and registered religious organizations ranging from the Roman Catholic Church (9,351 members) to Homechurch (11 members). There are 22,726 individuals (7.1 percent) who belong to other or unspecified religious organizations and 9,265 (2.9 percent) who are not members of any religious organization. There are also religions, such as Judaism, that have been practiced in the country for years but whose followers have never requested official recognition. The National Statistical Bureau does not keep track of Jewish community numbers, and there is no synagogue or Jewish cultural center; however, up to 60 persons attend occasional Jewish events and activities organized by a few Jewish immigrants.

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

The number of foreigners receiving residence permits increased significantly between 2004 and 2008. In direct relation to the increase in foreigners (itinerant workers, immigrants, and refugees), the number of religious organizations significantly increased.

Foreigners constitute an estimated 80 percent of the Roman Catholic population. The Roman Catholic Church in Iceland estimated that the total of registered members may only capture one-half of the actual number of Catholics in the country. The Reykjavik Catholic Church holds one weekly English-language service, and a number of Poles, Filipinos, and Lithuanians attend. Services are also conducted in other languages in other areas nationwide. The Catholic congregation includes a large number of Poles, served by four Polish priests. In addition to Icelandic priests, the Catholic Church employs priests from Argentina, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Slovakia, and the United Kingdom. Since there are few Catholic churches outside of Reykjavik, Lutheran ministers regularly lend their churches to Catholic priests so that they can conduct Masses for members in rural areas.

There are two registered religious organizations representing Islam and approximately 800 to 1,200 Muslims living in the country, according to those groups. The Association of Muslims in Iceland (Felag muslima a Islandi), founded in 1997, has 402 members, and the Islamic Cultural Center of Iceland (Menningarsetur muslima a Islandi), registered in 2009, has an estimated 200 members. Muslims are concentrated in the capital area (although there are a number of Kosovar Muslim refugees in the small northern town of Dalvik). The two organizations have their own houses of worship, with daily prayer nights and weekly Friday prayers that attract a core group of approximately 30-50 and 60-70 individuals, respectively.

## Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

### Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. 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. However, it also bans teaching or practices harmful to good morals or public order.

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 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 statistics from the State Church Bishop's Office on services in which state church ministers or facilities play a role, which frequently include services for non-ELC members, nine of ten children are baptized in their first year, more than 90 percent of adolescents are confirmed, 75 percent of the total population is married in the church, and 99 percent are buried with church ceremonies. 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. Sidmennt, the Icelandic Ethical Humanist Association, which has approximately 300 members, strongly supports legislation to separate church and state.

The state directly pays the salaries of the 139 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 Lutheran Bishop of Iceland appoints state church ministers. The state operates a network of Lutheran parish churches throughout the country, and land use plans for new housing include parish churches as necessary. State radio broadcasts worship services every Sunday morning and daily devotions morning and night, contributing to state Lutheran domination of religion-oriented broadcasting.

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.

The Government observes Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, Whit Monday, Christmas Eve (afternoon only), Christmas Day, and Boxing Day as national holidays.

A 1999 law sets specific conditions and procedures that religious organizations must follow to gain state subsidies. All taxpayers 16 years of age and older must pay a church tax of approximately \$82 (ISK 10,260) in 2009--lowered from ISK 10,344 in 2008. Individuals may direct their church tax payments to any of the religious groups the state has officially registered and recognized. 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 taxes go to the university, asserting that this is inconsistent with the constitutional right of freedom of association.

During the reporting period, the Government gave the state church approximately \$41.6 million (ISK 5.2 billion). Of that amount, the church tax funded \$16.2 million (ISK 2.02 billion), the cemetery tax \$7.5 million (ISK 939 million), and general revenues \$17.9 million (ISK 2.24 billion). The state church operates all cemeteries, and the money from the cemetery tax must be used solely for this purpose. All recognized religious groups have equal access to the country's cemeteries. The church tax also provided \$2 million (ISK 255 million) to the other recognized religious groups and \$1.7 million (ISK 210 million) to the University of Iceland.

In July 2008 the European Court of Human Rights agreed to take up a suit brought by the Icelandic Pagan Association (Asatruarfelagid) over its claimed right to receive funding proportional to its membership from monies currently made available only to the state church. In 2006 the Association sued the Ministry of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs and the Ministry of Finance for access to such funding. These funds supplement the income that the national church receives from church taxes, which the plaintiff asserted favors state Lutheranism in violation of Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights. The Association lost at the District (2006) and Supreme Court (2007) levels and appealed to the European Court of Human Rights. The case had not been heard by the end of the reporting period.

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 application. To register, a religious organization must "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 describing the organization's operations over the past year. The law also specifies that the leader of a religious organization must be at least 25 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. During the reporting period, one group, the Islamic Cultural Center of Iceland (Menningarsetur muslima a Islandi), applied to register as a religious organization. Authorities approved the application in March 2009. A 2008 registration application by the New Avalon Center remained under review at the end of the reporting period.

The law confirms that parents control the religious affiliation of their children until the children reach the age of 16. Changes require the consent of both parents if they both have custody; if only one parent has custody, then the consent of the other parent is not required. However, the Children's Act requires that parents consult their children about any changes in the children's affiliation after the age of 12, and such changes require the requesting children's signatures. In the absence of specific instructions to the contrary from both parents (or from the mother only if the father is not claiming paternal rights or is unknown), children at birth are registered as having the same religious affiliation as their mothers.

Virtually all schools are public schools. School grades 1-10 (ages 6-15) are required by law to include instruction in theology. The law also mandates that general teaching practices be shaped by "the Christian heritage of Icelandic

culture, equality, responsibility, concern, tolerance, and respect for human value."

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 teachers often are given wide latitude in the classroom. Lessons on non-Christian religions are part of the curriculum, but teachers focus mostly on Christianity. The compulsory curriculum for Christianity, ethics, and theology, does, however, suggest a multicultural approach to religious education and an emphasis on teaching a variety of beliefs. In secondary schools, theology continued to be taught under the rubric of "community studies" along with sociology, philosophy, and history.

In fall 2007 the town of Gardabaer's compulsory levels (grades 1-10) discontinued a year-old state church-run pastoral care program for students. The towns of Alftanes and Mosfellsbaer continued to use the program, which was introduced in those towns in 2006 and 1999, respectively. School authorities and the municipality where a school is located, without any involvement by the Ministry of Education, decide if they want to offer the program. The Ethical Humanist Association Sidmennt and representatives from nonstate religious organizations continued their public criticism of the program's use in public schools, claiming that the pastoral care program contained aspects of religious indoctrination. Those who supported the program stated that it was merely a means for students to talk about their feelings with a minister or a deacon and noted that participation in the program was not mandatory. A minority of students took advantage of the service.

Students may be exempted from Christianity classes. The law provides the Minister of Education with the 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. Some observers have noted that this discourages students or their parents from requesting such exemptions and may isolate students who seek exemptions or put them at risk of bullying in schools.

The Government does not actively promote interfaith understanding and does not sponsor programs or an official church-government council to coordinate interfaith dialogue; however, many church groups sponsor meetings between the leaders of various religious organizations. A Japanese-born minister of the state church has been designated to serve immigrant communities and help recent arrivals of all religious groups integrate into society.

#### 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 reporting period.

In January 2008 the City of Reykjavik awarded a plot of land to the Icelandic Pagan Association to build a place of worship. This followed the signature of a declaration of intent in 2006. Architectural delays and funding constraints during the year postponed the start of construction of the Association's place of worship.

In September 2008 the City of Reykjavik awarded the Icelandic Buddhist Movement a plot of land to build a temple.

In November 2007 the city approved a detailed land use plan that included a plot of land available for the construction of a Russian Orthodox church. Leasing and architectural design discussions were underway at the end of the reporting period.

The long-pending application to the Reykjavik City Planning Commission for land to build a mosque, originally filed with the city in 2000, encountered further delay during the reporting period, in part because of what the commission described as uncertainty over which of two groups was the appropriate representative of the Muslim community. However, in previous years the city cited other reasons for the delay in processing the application.

Some observers thought that prejudice was behind the delay in approval, since other groups' applications for similar plots made swifter progress during that time.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners 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 who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

#### Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were isolated reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. 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 remains an important part of the country's cultural identity.

Unlike in previous years, there were no reports of isolated incidents where individuals harassed Muslim women by removing their headscarves on the streets of Reykjavik.

Muslims in the country, seconded by independent observers, expressed concern that Omega, a Christian television station, broadcast distorted, negative coverage of Muslims and Islam. The station's broadcast area included approximately 75 percent of the country's population.

The Forum for Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation, representing major registered religious groups, continued to meet during the reporting period. The forum was established after a meeting in 2005 sponsored by the national church and has the goal of fostering dialogue and strengthening links between religious groups and life-stance organizations. The forum states that it is open to all registered religious organizations.

#### 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. The U.S. Embassy also maintains a regular dialogue on religious freedom issues with the leaders of various religious groups and nongovernmental organizations.