



Ireland

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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.

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

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

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 27,136 square miles and a population of 4,239,800. The country is overwhelmingly Roman Catholic. According to official government statistics based on the 2006 census, the religious affiliation of the population is 86.8 percent Catholic (3,681,446), 2.9 percent Church of Ireland (125,585), 0.76 percent Muslim (32,539), 0.68 percent unspecified Christian (29,206), 0.55 percent Presbyterian (23,546), 0.49 percent Orthodox (20,798), 0.28 percent Methodist (12,160), less than 0.1 percent Jewish (1,930), and 6 percent unaffiliated (25,640).

The number of immigrants increased during the year; Muslim and Orthodox Christian communities in particular continued to grow, especially in Dublin. The 2006 census reported a 69.9 percent increase in the Muslim population since the 2002 census and a 99.3 percent increase in the Orthodox Christian population during the same period. Immigrants and noncitizens encountered few difficulties in practicing their religious beliefs.

According to 2005 figures released by the Catholic Communications Office (CCO), approximately 60 percent of Catholics (including those in Northern Ireland) attended Mass once a week and 5 percent attended Mass once a day. The CCO reported that there was a noticeable increase in attendance during Christmas and Easter holidays and around the time of the death of Pope John Paul II in 2005. A similar survey conducted in 2005 by the Evangelical Alliance Ireland (EAI) estimated that up to 30,000 evangelicals (comprising Baptists, members of Assemblies of God, Pentecostals, and charismatics) attended services each week.

Section II. Status of Freedom of Religion

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 Constitution prohibits promotion of one religion over another and discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief, and the Government does not restrict the teaching or practice of any faith. There is no state religion, and there is no discrimination against nontraditional religious groups. There is no legal requirement that religious groups or organizations register with the Government, nor is there any formal mechanism for government recognition of a religion or religious group.

The Employment Equality Act prohibits discrimination in employment on nine grounds, including religion. The Equality

Authority works toward continued progress in the elimination of discrimination and the promotion of equality in employment. The Equal Status Act prohibits discrimination outside of employment (such as in education or provision of goods) on the same grounds cited in the Employment Equality Act.

While Catholicism is the dominant religion, it is not favored officially or in practice. Because of the country's history and tradition as a predominantly Catholic country and society, the majority of those in political office are Catholic, and some Catholic holy days are also national holidays.

The following Roman Catholic holy days are national holidays: St. Patrick's Day (the country's national day), Good Friday, Easter Monday, Christmas, and St. Stephen's Day. National religious holidays do not have an evident negative effect on other religious groups.

The Government permits but does not require religious instruction in public schools. Most primary and secondary schools are denominational, and their boards of management are governed partially by trustees within the Catholic Church or, in some cases, the Church of Ireland. Under the terms of the Constitution, the Department of Education must and does provide equal funding to schools of different religious denominations, including Islamic and Jewish schools. Although religious instruction is an integral part of the curriculum, parents may exempt their children from such instruction.

In 2003 the Equality Authority published a booklet stating that church-linked schools are permitted legally to refuse to admit a student who is not of that religion, providing the school can prove that the refusal is essential to the maintenance of the "ethos" of the school (for example, too many Catholics in a Muslim school could prevent the school from having a Muslim "ethos"). However, there were no reports of any children being refused admission to any school for this reason.

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 isolated reports of anti-Semitism during the year. On January 12, 2007, a man previously convicted of acts of vandalism against Jewish establishments in Dublin was convicted of sending offensive e-mails to Jewish community individuals. He received a six-month suspended sentence contingent on his continued psychiatric treatment. On September 22, 2006, two swastikas and an expletive were painted on the gates and wall of a college. The police were investigating at the end of the reporting period.

On August 11, 2006, a pair of children's shoes with the word "Qana" (a reference to the conflict involving Israeli and Hezbollah) written in red ink was found outside the synagogue in Cork.

On July 20, 2006, unknown persons painted anti-Semitic graffiti on the exterior wall of an office building during the conflict involving Israel and Hezbollah. The police promptly removed the graffiti but never identified those responsible for it. The Israeli embassy in Dublin received anti-Semitic and anti-Israel phone calls in July. A rabbi's office in Dublin also received several phone calls in July 2006 that expressed outrage at Israel's actions during the conflict with Lebanon.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On February 26, 2007, the Prime Minister's office hosted an interfaith reception to launch the Structured Dialogue with Churches, Faith Communities, and Non-Confessional Bodies, the Government's religious outreach program. Historically, religious bodies within the country were responsible for many of the community services that the Government is now providing (education, hospitals, financial aid, etc.). The first goal of the religious outreach program is to work with religious organizations that are no longer able to provide community services to transfer these responsibilities to the Government. The second goal is to open lines of communication between the newer religious communities and the Government, ensuring that these communities are given equal access to government services. The program included individual meetings with heads of the different religious orders in the country, as well as government hosted interfaith conferences.

Since February 2007 the Prime Minister has met separately with the heads of the Church of Ireland, the Catholic Church, and the Jewish community. Also, in November 2006, the Prime Minister met with Muslim community leaders to celebrate the end of Ramadan, and the President attended an Eid al Fitr dinner at Dublin's prominent Sunni mosque. The Government's willingness to accept and engage the newer religious communities may contribute to a general sense of acceptance among immigrants. For example, in December 2006, a public opinion poll of Muslims living in the country reported that 77 percent said they felt accepted by society and 73 percent said they felt fully integrated into society. Also, by recognizing the importance of religion in the country, the population generally does not view the government as being in conflict or competition with religious institutions.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were limited reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice. Because religion, ethnicity, race, social class, and political affiliation are often inextricably linked, it is often difficult to attribute any single motive for a particular discriminatory event. Nevertheless, the events described in this section contributed to the social context within which discrimination took place, which resulted in cases of social intolerance and acts that restricted religious freedom. During the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel in the summer of 2006, articles appeared in the press and on the Internet discussing the connection between anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli speech (see Anti-Semitism).

On March 28, 2007, the country's state-sponsored academy of creative arts, Aosdana, voted to end cooperation with Israeli state-sponsored cultural events and institutions in response to the then-current situation between Israel and the occupied territories. The motion was defeated in the organization's national assembly.

On January 14, 2007, the press carried stories about tensions in the Dublin Muslim community regarding an imam who was no longer welcome in mainstream mosques in Dublin, which he claimed to be under the sway of Muslim extremists. He claimed that Islamic extremists threatened his life.

On September 16, 2006, 61 of the country's academics published a letter in *The Irish Times* and called on the European Union (EU) to boycott Israeli universities due to the current situation in the occupied territories. The EU responded by calling for academic freedom and opposing the boycott. Some printed accounts reported the boycott as a form of anti-Semitism.

In late August 2006, a press interview reported on tensions in the country's Muslim community brought on by Welsh authorities' arresting and releasing without charge two Algerian-born citizens of the country suspected of plotting terrorism. An interview with two Islamic converts illustrated instances of verbal abuse directed towards the Muslim community.

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 U.S. Embassy continued its engagement program aimed at fostering greater understanding of political, social, cultural, and religious views prevalent among Muslims in the country. Embassy officials, including the Ambassador, met regularly with Muslims and participated in several events hosted by both embassy staff and Muslim contacts. Embassy officials also met with the members of the Jewish community, the head of the Romanian Orthodox Church, and prominent leaders from both Catholic and Protestant religious groups to discuss ways of promoting religious freedom and to survey the level of religious freedom experienced by the various religious groups. The Embassy's third annual interfaith Thanksgiving reception facilitated dialogue and understanding of religious freedom among governmental and nongovernmental organizations as well as among religious and community leaders; the reception also assisted government outreach to minority groups.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)