



Ireland

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

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

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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 limited 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 27,136 square miles and a population of 4.3 million. The country is predominantly 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).

An estimated 67,000 immigrants arrived in the country during the period covered by this report; almost half of these immigrants came from other European Union states. Muslim and Orthodox Christian communities in particular continue to grow, especially in Dublin. The 2006 census reports a 69.9 percent increase in the Muslim population and a 99.3 percent increase in the Orthodox Christian population since the 2002 census. Immigrants and noncitizens encounter 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) attend Mass once a week and 5 percent attend Mass once a day. The CCO reported a noticeable increase in attendance during Easter and Christmas holidays. **In part because many priests are close to retirement, the Irish Catholic press predicts that the percentage of Catholics attending Mass regularly will decline in coming years.** A similar survey conducted in 2005 by the Evangelical Alliance Ireland estimates that up to 30,000 evangelicals (comprising Baptists, members of Assemblies of God, Pentecostals, and charismatics) attend services each week.

Section II. Status of Freedom of Religion

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution 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 Constitution prohibits promotion of one religious group 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 religious belief or group.

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

The Constitution provides that "publication or utterance" of "blasphemous matter" is an offense punishable in accordance with law, but it does not define blasphemy. Accordingly, the Defamation Bill 2006 was initiated in the Seanad (Upper House of Parliament) and passed by that body on March 11, 2008. However, at the end of the period covered by this report, the bill was still in committee phase at the Dail (Lower House of Parliament). The intent is to amend the bill during this phase to take account of the constitutional considerations in relation to blasphemy. The Defamation Act of 1961 provides that a person convicted of blasphemous libel is liable to a fine not exceeding approximately \$900 (€600) or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years or both, or to penal servitude of not more than seven years. Under the Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred Act of 1989, publishing material that stirs up hatred against a religious group is a violation; however, the 1991 Law Reform Commission stated that laws on blasphemy were incompatible in a society that respects freedom of speech. To avoid a referendum on the Constitution, the Commission recommended creating a new statute against matter done solely for the purpose of outraging large numbers of adherents. The Commission's recommendation of creating a new statute is being examined in the context of addressing the provisions relating to blasphemy in the Defamation Bill 2006. In the absence of legislation and in the present uncertain state of the law, the Court has not prosecuted anyone for blasphemy recently; the lone blasphemy case, which was heard in 1999, did not result in a conviction.

While Catholicism is the dominant religion, it is not favored officially. 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 Government observes St. Patrick's Day (the country's national day), Good Friday, Easter Monday, Christmas, and St. Stephen's Day as national holidays.

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 fewer cases, the Church of Ireland or other religious denominations. 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 of most schools, 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 religious group, 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. Staff, however, at religious schools may be selected for their religious beliefs as an exemption to the Equality Legislation (Section 37, Employment Equality Act 2004).

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.

On August 14, 2007, the press reported that a Sikh man who joined the volunteer reserve of the police for Dublin was informed that he would not be allowed to wear a turban while on duty, because it was not part of the regulation police uniform. Integration Minister Conor Lenihan said that immigrants must accept the country's culture but acknowledged the importance of the turban in the Sikh community. The decision

provoked a strong response from the Sikh community and others. Ciaran Cuffe, a Green Party Member of Parliament, called on the police commissioner to lift the ban, noting that the turban was a vital part of Sikh religious belief, as did a member of the government's National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism; however, the police determined that all officers must adhere to the uniform code. The Sikh man decided to leave the volunteer reserve because of the uniform restrictions.

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.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On April 22, 2008, the Prime Minister hosted a reception for 100 religious representatives and met with several religious groups throughout the reporting period as part of the Structured Dialogue with Churches, Faith Communities, and Non-Confessional Bodies, the Government's religious outreach program started on February 26, 2007. 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.). In addition, according to government and nongovernmental organization contacts, religious organizations now play an important role in helping newly arrived immigrants integrate into the community. 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 Government's willingness to accept and engage the newer religious communities may contribute to a general sense of acceptance among immigrants. For example, in 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 affiliation, belief, or practice.

On March 15, 2008, members of the group Anonymous held a protest against the Church of Scientology (COS) outside its office in Dublin. The number of picketers was small, and the protest drew minimal media attention.

The COS protested its exclusion from the Structured Dialogue with Churches, Faith Communities, and Non-Confessional Bodies, the Government's religious outreach program. In a letter to the Prime Minister, the Irish representative of the Church asked if the Government was "snubbing" Scientologists by excluding them from these talks. However, according to government contacts, there are a number of smaller religious groups that, historically, were not providers of community services such as schools or hospitals. Since one of the main focuses of the Government's outreach program is to discuss the transition into state care of community services that were traditionally provided or overseen by churches or religious groups, the Government included only those religious groups that would be affected by this transition.

On April 25, 2008, the High Court found that a 2006 ex parte court decision that allowed a local hospital to administer a blood transfusion to a female member of Jehovah's Witnesses who had refused it on religious grounds, while flawed, was not a denial of her constitutional rights and that the action was justified by the circumstances of the case. The woman, who sued the hospital, said that the order breached her rights and represented an assault on her person, similar to rape.

In March 2008 the media reported a divide between the Sunni and Shi'ite Muslim communities in the country,

although prominent imams from the respective groups denied a rift. The reports focused on the Iraqi immigrant communities in the country and quoted one young Sunni girl as being "scornful" towards her Shi'ite classmates.

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 continued its engagement program aimed at fostering greater understanding of political, social, cultural, and religious views prevalent among Muslims in the country. Embassy officials met regularly with Muslims and participated in several events hosted by both embassy staff and Muslim groups. Embassy officials also met with the members of the Jewish community and prominent leaders from 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 fourth annual interfaith Thanksgiving reception facilitated dialogue and understanding of religious freedom among governmental organizations and NGOs as well as among religious and community leaders; the reception also assisted government outreach to minority groups.

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