



Norway

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. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway, the state church, enjoys some benefits not available to other religious groups.

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 very few 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 150,000 square miles and a population of 4.75 million. Citizens are considered to be members of the state church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway, unless they explicitly state otherwise. For example, citizens may elect to associate themselves with another denomination, nonreligious organization (e.g., the Norwegian Humanist Association), or to have no religious affiliation at all. An estimated 82 percent of the population (3.9 million persons) nominally belongs to the state church. However, actual church attendance is quite low.

Other religious groups operate freely and include various Protestant Christian denominations (174,000 members), Muslims (80,000), and Roman Catholics (51,500). Buddhists, Jews, Orthodox Christians, Sikhs, and Hindus are present in very small numbers, together constituting less than 1 percent of the population. The Norwegian Humanist Association--the only national organization for those who do not formally practice any religion, including atheists--has 79,722 registered members. The Government estimated that an additional 6.7 percent of the population (318,000 persons) does not formally practice religion. An unknown number of persons belong to religious institutions but do not formally register with the Government, so their numbers are not reflected in the statistics.

The majority of European and American immigrants, who make up approximately 45 percent of the foreign-born population, are either Christian or nonreligious, with the exception of Muslim refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. Most non-Western immigrants practice Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, or Hinduism. Of religious minority members, 42 percent are concentrated in the Oslo metropolitan area, including 76 percent of Muslims and most of the Buddhist community.

Section II. Status of 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 law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway is the state church. The state supports it financially, and there is a constitutional requirement that the King and at least one-half of the cabinet belong to this church.

In 2008 there was a public debate about introducing greater separation in the state-church relationship. In April 2008 the Minister of Culture presented the results of a parliament-commissioned report on the state and church relationship that had been 5 years in the making and had included significant public input. The report called for maintaining the state church but for further democratization of the Church and for the Government to consider changes to the Constitution that would further separate church and state functions. One of the immediate effects was the signing of a church agreement that gives the state church the ability to select, but not appoint, its own bishops, a role that had previously been fulfilled by the King's Council. The legal power to officially appoint bishops will not be transferred to the Church until Parliament amends the Constitution on this point, which it was expected to do during the 2009-11 session.

A religious community must register with the Government only if it desires state financial support, which is provided to all registered denominations in proportion to their formally registered membership. Some faith groups argued that this registration requirement disadvantages their efforts to get funding, since the faiths most popular among immigrants generally, including Islam and Roman Catholicism, are also most popular among individuals who are in the country either illegally or as political refugees, and who may be leery of contact with state officials.

There are no special licensing or registration requirements for foreign religious workers. Such workers are subject to the same visa and work permit requirements as other foreign workers.

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.

A 1997 law introduced the Christian Knowledge and Religious and Ethical Information (CKREE) course for grades 1 through 10 (generally ages 6 to 16). The CKREE reviews world religions and philosophy while promoting tolerance and respect for all religious beliefs. Citing the country's Christian history (and given the stated importance of Christianity to society), the CKREE devotes an extensive amount of time to studying Christianity. This class is mandatory, without any exceptions for children of other religious groups. On special grounds, students may be exempted from participating in or performing specific religious acts, such as church services or prayer.

Organizations for atheists, as well as Muslim communities, contested the legality of mandatory religious education, claiming that it was a breach of freedom of religion and parents' right to provide religious instruction to their children. After the case was heard before the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in 2002 and again in 2006, the Government modified the curriculum and expanded the education to more thoroughly discuss other religions while continuing an emphasis on Christianity as the religion of the majority of citizens.

During March 2006 a mosque in the city of Bergen was required to close its temporary premises due to building code violations. The Muslim community planned on relocating to a permanent location, which had not been fully constructed. The city paid approximately \$26,600 (NK160,000) to address the building code violations and stated that the mosque could remain at its temporary location until the end of 2007, later extended to August 2008, at which time the new mosque was expected to be completed.

The Workers' Protection and Working Environment Act permits employers to ask job applicants who are applying for positions in religious or other private schools, or day care centers, whether they agree to teach and behave in accordance with the institution's or religion's beliefs and principles.

In 2006 the city of Oslo recommended banning the wearing of burqas and nikabs in schools. The city sent its recommendation to the Ministry of Education and Research to determine necessary changes to existing laws to implement such a ban during the 2006-07 school year. In February 2007 the Ministry encouraged schools to ban the wearing of nikabs, while emphasizing that no legislation on the issue would be forthcoming. Every school would be allowed to independently determine whether to implement such a ban. During the reporting period, there were no reports that any school implemented such a ban.

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 was one reported anti-Semitic incident during the reporting period. A Norwegian police cadet participating in a tour with other cadets refused to wear a kippah when visiting the synagogue in Trondheim, on the ground that he was a Muslim. The guide explained that wearing a kippah was a question of showing respect for a house of worship much in the same way that taking off shoes in a mosque would be. The police cadet expressed his displeasure with blasphemous profanity, entered the synagogue, and slammed the door. He wandered around the synagogue alone for 30 minutes and then left. He later boasted to his fellow cadets that he had "finally put the Jews in their place." The chairman of the synagogue complained to the police in a letter. By the time the police addressed the matter formally, the cadet had become a full police officer. He received a reprimand and a note in his record, according to a letter sent from the police directorate to the synagogue.

There were no other reported societal abuses or cases of discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice during the reporting period.

A Cooperation Council for Faith and Secular Society included the state church and other religious communities, among them the Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and secular humanist communities. The Oslo Coalition for Freedom of Religious Beliefs facilitated closer coordination and international cooperation on religious freedom issues both domestically and outside of the country. The Ecumenical Council of Christian Communities promoted cooperation within the Christian community. Bilateral dialogue between the state church and the Muslim and Jewish communities continued to generate statements in support of minority rights and other human rights.

The Jewish population numbers approximately one thousand persons. A court case concerning shots fired at the Oslo synagogue in September 2006 concluded in May 2008, with the main assailant, Arfan Bhatti, convicted of conspiracy to commit "serious vandalism." The country has no general hate-crime law, although Bhatti was charged with, but acquitted of, terrorism in connection with the synagogue shooting and plots to attack the U.S. and Israeli embassies. The prosecutor declined to appeal any part of the judge's decision.

Reports of acts of vandalism against the Jewish Museum in Oslo during the first week of August 2007 were, in fact, erroneous. There was one incident of vandalism, but after a police investigation it was determined that the vandal was attempting to break the window of a recording company, against whom the vandal had a grudge, on the second floor of the same building.

The country is a member of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research. In 2003 the Government instituted annual observance of Holocaust Memorial Day on January 27 in schools nationwide, as part of a National Plan of Action to Combat Racism and Discrimination. In addition, high school curricula include the deportation and extermination of the country's Jews from 1942 to 1945.

In 2006 the Center for Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities opened an exhibition and research center, which focuses on new research, education, and information-sharing activities, such as sponsoring exhibitions and conferences in the areas of religious, ethnic, or racially motivated discrimination and violence.

On June 3, 2008, a major regional paper published a cartoon of a Muslim wearing a turban, an explosive belt, and a t-shirt saying "I am Muhammad; nobody dares print my image." According to the cartoonist and the editor of the paper, the cartoon was published in response to the bombing of the Danish embassy in Pakistan the previous day, and was not, in fact, supposed to depict the Prophet Muhammad. The Muslim community expressed outrage, and the images were circulated to over 1,200 websites around the world, but community representatives met with the editorial board on June 10 and said the "misunderstanding" had been cleared up. Norwegian government officials refused to comment on the case, although the Pakistani Ambassador lodged a strong protest with the Government in which he called the printing of the cartoon "terrorism."

In February 2008, out of solidarity with the Danish cartoonist Kurt Westergaard, who had received death threats due to the image he drew of the Prophet Muhammad with a bomb in his turban, several Danish

newspapers chose to reprint the caricatures of Muhammad that had caused problems for Danish and Norwegian authorities in 2006. Most mainstream Norwegian media did not reprint them, allegedly fearing that doing so would offend Muslims inside and outside of the country. This decision led to a wide debate on the appropriate role of free speech, especially the extent to which religious imagery must be protected by law.

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 regularly sponsored speakers and events to highlight religious freedom. In January 2008 the Embassy hosted Muslim U.S. Congressman Keith Ellison at a well-attended reception to discuss interreligious dialogue. In 2007 the Ambassador hosted the mission's first Iftar, which was widely attended by community leaders, diplomats, and politicians. The objective of the Iftar was to promote interreligious dialogue and religious tolerance. In addition the Embassy hosted an interfaith Thanksgiving with a focus on youth participants that included visitors from 14 of the country's faith groups.

Also during the reporting period, the Ambassador and his staff visited mosques, synagogues, and Buddhist temples throughout the country to discuss U.S. government outreach and religious dialogue efforts both in the country and around the world.

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