



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Poland

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.

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 generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. Jewish community leaders reported several serious anti-Jewish incidents in the country during the period covered by this report, including an attack on the chief rabbi of Poland and the stabbing of an antifascist activist by a neofascist skinhead group. There were occasional desecrations of Jewish and, more frequently, Roman Catholic cemeteries by skinheads and other marginal elements of society. The Government publicly denounced anti-Semitic acts.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. Embassy and Consulate General Krakow officers actively monitor threats to religious freedom and seek further resolution of unsettled legacies of the Holocaust and the communist era.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 120,725 square miles and a population of approximately 39 million. More than 96 percent of citizens were identified as Roman Catholic; however, Eastern Orthodox, Greek Catholic, and much smaller Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim congregations were also present.

According to the 2005 Annual Statistical Yearbook of Poland, the following figures represent the formal membership of the listed religious groups, but not the actual number of persons in those religious communities; for example, the actual number of Jews was estimated at between 20,000 and 30,000, while the formal membership of the Union of Jewish Communities totaled only 2,500. The number of Jews was slowly rising, partly because of converts.

The yearbook estimated that there were 34,206,767 baptized Roman Catholics; 509,100 Orthodox Church members; 53,000 Greek Catholics; 127,377 Jehovah's Witnesses; 77,500 Lutherans (Augsburg Confession); 23,894 Old Catholic Mariavits; 19,172 members of the Polish Catholic Church; 20,890 Pentecostals; 9,488 Seventh-day Adventists; 4,688 Baptists; 5,076 members of the New Apostolic Church; 111 members of Muslim associations; 915 Hare Krishnas; 4,420 Methodists; 2,952 members of the Church of Christ; 3,550 Lutherans (Reformed); 2,274 Catholic Mariavits; 1,305 members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons); and 2,500 members of the Union of Jewish Communities. The vast majority of the Jewish community in Poland, which had numbered approximately 3 million people before the Nazi occupation of Poland during World War II, was killed in the Holocaust. The community was estimated at 20,000 to 30,000, including the 2,500 registered members listed in the country's Statistical Yearbook, during the period covered by this report.

Each of these religious groups has a relationship with the state governed by either legislation or treaty, with the exception of Jehovah's Witnesses, the New Apostolic Church, the Church of Krishna Consciousness (Hare Krishna), and the Church of Christ.

A March 2005 public opinion poll indicated that the attitude of Poles toward religion was little changed from the last polling, conducted in 2003. Approximately 58 percent of citizens actively participated in religious ceremonies at least once per week. Nine percent of respondents declared that they had no contact with the Roman Catholic Church, 16 percent that they attended Mass once to twice per month, and 17 percent that they attended Mass only sporadically. Approximately 3 percent declared themselves to be nonbelievers. The survey also found that women continued to be more religious than men, and, while 58 percent of citizens considered themselves active Catholics, 39 percent preferred to consider themselves "believers in their own way."

Foreign missionary groups operated freely in the country.

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 Criminal Code stipulates that

offending religious sentiment through public speech is punishable by a fine or up to a three-year prison term. The Roman Catholic Church was the dominant religious group in the country.

There are fifteen religious groups whose relationship with the state is governed by specific legislation that outlines the internal structure of the religious groups, their activities, and procedures for property restitution. There are 146 other registered religious groups that do not have a statutorily defined relationship with the state. All registered religious groups, including the original fifteen, enjoy equal protection under the law, and there were no reports of serious conflicts among churches or religious groups.

Religious communities may register with the Ministry of the Interior; however, they are not required to do so and may function freely without registration. According to the 1989 Law on Guaranteeing Freedom of Conscience and Belief, registration requires that the group submit the names of at least one hundred members as well as other information about the group. This information on membership must be confirmed by a notary public, although the registration itself often appears to be a formality. In 2005, no new religious groups registered. However, in the first half of 2006, two new religious groups registered with the Ministry: the Evangelical Christian Church and the Presbyterian Church. In April 2006, the Salvation Army's application to register as a religion was denied for technical reasons by the Ministry of Interior. The Salvation Army appealed this decision and was still awaiting a decision on this appeal when the period covered by this report ended. All registered religious groups receive the same privileges, such as duty-free importation of office equipment and reduced taxes.

Citizens enjoy the freedom to practice any faith that they choose. Religious groups may organize, select and train personnel, solicit and receive contributions, publish, and meet without government interference. There are no government restrictions on establishing and maintaining places of worship.

The law places Catholic, Jewish, Orthodox, and Protestant communities on the same legal footing, and the Government attempts to address the problems that minority religious groups may face.

Foreign missionaries are subject only to the standard rules applicable to foreigners temporarily in the country. There were no reports that missionaries were denied entry into the country.

Although the constitution gives parents the right to bring up their children in compliance with their own religious and philosophical beliefs, religious education classes continue to be taught in the public schools at public expense. Children have a choice between religious instruction and ethics. Although Catholic Church representatives teach the vast majority of religious classes in the schools, parents may request such classes in any of the religions legally registered, including Protestant, Orthodox, and Jewish religious instruction. While it is not common, such non-Catholic religious instruction exists, and the Ministry of Education pays the instructors. Religious education instructors, including clergy, receive salaries from the state for teaching religion in public schools. Catholic Church representatives are included on a commission that determines whether books qualify for school use.

Catholic holy days (Easter Monday, Corpus Christi Day, Assumption of the Virgin Mary, All Saints' Day, Christmas, and St. Stephen's Day) are national holidays.

In 1998, the Concordat, a treaty signed in 1993 regulating relations between the Government and the Vatican, was ratified by Parliament, signed by the president, and took effect. The parliamentary vote came after years of bitter disputes between Concordat supporters and opponents. The debate centered on whether the treaty ensured the Catholic Church's right to guarantee freedom of religion for its congregants or blurred the line between church and state. The Government and the Catholic Church participate at the highest levels in a Joint Government-Episcopate Task Force, which meets regularly to discuss church-state relations.

The Government continues to work with both local and international religious groups to address property claims and other sensitive issues stemming from Nazi- and communist-era confiscations and persecutions. The Government enjoys good relations with many domestic and international Jewish groups. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is largely responsible for coordinating relations between the Government and these international organizations, although the President also plays an important role. The Government cooperates effectively with a variety of international organizations, both governmental and nongovernmental, for the preservation of historic sites, including cemeteries and houses of worship. However, contentious issues regarding property restitution and preservation of historic religious sites and cemeteries remained only partially settled.

Progress continued in implementing the laws that permit local religious communities to submit claims for property owned prior to World War II that subsequently was nationalized. The Catholic and Orthodox churches reported general satisfaction with government action to restitute property. A 1997 law, which mirrors previous legislation benefiting other religious communities, permits the local Jewish community to submit claims for such property. The law allowed for a five-year period to file claims, the longest period allowed for any religious group, for the return of synagogues, cemeteries, and community headquarters, as well as buildings that were used for other religious, educational, or charitable activities. The laws included time limits for filing claims; these deadlines expired in recent years, and no additional claims may be filed. However, restitution commissions composed of representatives of the Government and the Jewish community were continuing adjudication of previously filed claims.

Claims by the local Jewish community, whose opportunity for filing claims under the 1997 law expired in 2002, totaled 5,544. The commission considered 857 cases, of which 277 were settled amicably and 317 properties were restored.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and some observers criticized the generally slow pace of restitution of Jewish communal property and noted reluctance by the Government to return valuable properties in some cases. In contrast, restitution of Jewish communal property appeared to be progressing well in cities where it had the support of the local governments, such as Warsaw and Lodz. The Government elected in 2005 vowed to expedite the process, particularly with respect to noncontroversial cases.

Of approximately 10,000 communal property claims filed for restitution of religious property, more than 4,100 were resolved, with more than 1,200 properties returned by the end of 2005.

At the end of the reporting period, approximately 2,959 of the 3,063 claims filed by the Catholic Church had been concluded, with 1,420 claims settled by agreement between the Church and the party in possession of the property (usually the national or a local government); 922 properties returned through decision of the commission on property restitution, which rules on disputed claims; and 617 claims rejected by the commission.

The Lutheran Church, for which the filing deadline was 1996, filed claims for 1,200 properties. Of these, 834 cases were heard, 228 of which were resolved amicably and 136 properties were restored.

A total of 313 claims were filed with the commission by the Orthodox Church, of which 137 were closed in full or in part.

The laws on communal property restitution do not address the issue of communal properties to which private third parties had title, leaving several controversial and complicated cases unresolved. In a number of cases, buildings and residences were built on land that included Jewish cemeteries destroyed during or after World War II.

There was no progress during the reporting period on adoption by Parliament of long-awaited legislation that would govern the restitution of private property. Parliament made several attempts to enact such legislation and passed a law in early 2001, but the president vetoed it because of its budgetary implications and because it was discriminatory. The legislation imposed a citizenship requirement that would have made most American citizens ineligible to file a claim. In early 2006, the Government expressed its intention to draft and submit new legislation regarding the restitution of private property. Some claimants for such restitution successfully regained title to their property in local courts. While approximately 500 claims totaling \$183 million have been settled over the past 10 years, the treasury estimated that 56,000 claims valued at approximately \$16.7 billion remained outstanding. The lack of legislation in this area affected individuals of many faiths seeking restitution or compensation for property confiscated during and after World War II.

The Government cooperates with the country's NGOs and officials of major denominations to promote religious tolerance and lends support to activities such as the March of the Living, an event to honor victims of the Holocaust. In January 2005, the country hosted a number of world leaders, including the U.S. Vice President and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, at ceremonies commemorating the sixtieth Anniversary of the Liberation of the Auschwitz and Birkenau concentration camps.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. In 2001, the Government established a department within the Ministry of Interior to monitor the activities of "new religious groups" and "cults." In April 2002, the Government closed the department; however, an employee of the Interior Ministry's Public Order Department continued to monitor religious groups.

Although the constitution provides for the separation of religion and state, crucifixes hang in both the upper and lower houses of Parliament, as well as in many other public buildings.

Public radio and television stations broadcast Catholic Mass, but only with licensure from the National Radio and Television Broadcasting Council.

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

Anti-Semitic feelings persisted among certain sectors of the population. Isolated incidents of harassment and violence against Jews continued to occur, almost always linked to skinheads and other marginal societal groups.

On May 27, 2006, during the visit of Pope Benedict XVI, Chief Rabbi of Poland Michael Shudrich was attacked by an anti-Semitic youth who knocked him down, sprayed him with pepper spray, and shouted "Poland is for Poles," an anti-Semitic slogan from the interwar period. After the attack, President Lech Kaczynski and Prime Minister Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz met with Shudrich and publicly denounced the attack and anti-Semitism.

Following this incident and one on May 16 in which an antifascist activist was stabbed by skinheads in Warsaw after being targeted by a neo-Nazi website, police created a special unit that combats neofascist activities, according to the prime minister's advisor on Jewish affairs. Police in July arrested the alleged content provider of Red Watch, the website that listed the name and whereabouts of the man who was stabbed by skinheads in Warsaw and which also promoted hatred of Jews and homosexuals.

There were more than 500 racist and xenophobic websites in the country, according to Never Again, an antiracism organization. Occasional

cases of cemetery desecration, including both Jewish and, more frequently, Catholic sites, also occurred during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

Orthodox religious officials reported accounts of discrimination towards the Orthodox community. There were reports of less than proportional funding for cultural events associated with the Orthodox community, layoffs in which Orthodox employees were the first dismissed, and opinions circulated in the local press in some areas depicting Roman Catholicism as necessary for true citizenship.

In February 2006, Prime Minister Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz and Foreign Minister Stefan Meller publicly apologized to Muslims for the publication of potentially offensive cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad in national daily Rzeczpospolita.

In March 2006, the NGO Media Ethics Council publicly condemned anti-Semitic statements made by commentator Stanislaw Michalkiewicz on the popular Catholic radio station Radio Maryja. In addition to Michalkiewicz's comments, Radio Maryja often aired anti-Semitic comments on call-in shows. The station, run by the controversial Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, had close relations with the ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS) and had never been fined by the National Broadcasting Council (KRRiT) for its anti-Semitic content despite public protest. However, in June, Elzbieta Kruk, the president of KRRiT, asked for a formal explanation of Michalkiewicz's comments. A KRRiT spokesman claimed that KRRiT could not begin discussing consequences for Radio Maryja's broadcasting without an explanation from the station first.

Opinion polls suggested that these anti-Semitic sentiments were not shared by a majority of citizens; an April 2006 poll published in the major daily Gazeta Wyborcza indicated that 89 percent of citizens interviewed believed Radio Maryja should not be involved in politics.

In May 2006, a government coalition was formed by the ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS) with the leaders of the League of Polish Families (LPR) and the Self Defense Party (SO). LPR's participation in the Government and the appointment of LPR Chairman Roman Giertych as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education sparked controversy amongst international Jewish groups, including the Anti-Defamation League, because of Giertych's ties to the All Poland's Youth League, a group which has long been perceived as anti-Semitic.

The fifteenth March of the Living took place on April 25, 2006. An estimated 10,000 participants walked from the former Auschwitz concentration camp to the former Birkenau death camp to honor victims of the Holocaust. Schoolchildren, Boy Scouts, the Polish-Israeli Friendship Society, Polish survivors of Auschwitz, and the Polish Union of Jewish Students participated in the march. Former Israeli Prime Minister Simon Peres led the march, which was also attended by many prominent world leaders. In May 2006, Pope Benedict XVI visited Auschwitz and reiterated his condemnation of the Holocaust and his commitment to interreligious harmony and freedom.

There was some public concern expressed about the growth of groups perceived to be "sects" and the influence of nonmainstream religious groups, especially during the summer travel season when young persons travel to camps and other gatherings. Newspapers and magazines published articles during the reporting period concerning the arrival of Scientologists in the country and depicting the Church of Scientology as a dangerous sect.

Interfaith groups worked to bring together the various religious groups in the country. The Polish Council of Christians and Jews met regularly to discuss issues of mutual interest, and the Catholic and Orthodox churches had an active bilateral commission. The Polish Ecumenical Council, a group that includes most religious groups other than the Roman Catholic Church, was also active. Approximately 250 Greek Catholic churches were taken over by Roman Catholic dioceses after World War II, and Greek Catholics were working to have those properties returned. This was an internal issue between the Greek and Roman Catholic dioceses, mediated by the Pope, which did not involve the Government.

In May 2006, the second annual Meeting with Arab Culture was held in Krakow. In June 2006, the city of Bydgoszcz and a local university hosted an Arabic Culture Day, with sessions focusing on tolerance and multiculturalism. Also in June, the Sixth Annual Muslim Cultural Days conference was held in Gdansk. The Warsaw Islamic Council and Warsaw University's Oriental Studies Department also planned and held numerous activities throughout the year to promote understanding of Muslim faith and culture.

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. Representatives of the U.S. Embassy and Consulate General Krakow regularly monitor issues relating to religious freedom and interfaith relations, including ethnic-Polish-Jewish relations. Embassy and consulate officers met frequently with a wide range of representatives of religious communities, the Government, and local authorities on such matters as religious freedom, property restitution, religious harassment, and interfaith cooperation. The embassy and consulate general actively urged the protection and return of former Jewish cemeteries throughout the country.

Embassy and consulate representatives, including the ambassador, regularly met with representatives of major religious communities, including leaders of the Jewish community, both in the capital and during travels throughout the country. Consulate officials routinely attended commemorations and ceremonial events at Auschwitz, honoring the Jews, Roma, ethnic Poles, and others killed there. They also monitored developments regarding historical sites related to the Holocaust, supported efforts at commemoration and youth education, and facilitated official visits to the Auschwitz Museum, which is located near Krakow. Embassy and consulate officers also remained in contact with and attended events associated with the Orthodox, Protestant, and Muslim minorities.

The embassy and the consulate continued to provide support for activities designed to promote cultural and religious tolerance. Those activities included press and public affairs support for the Auschwitz Jewish Center Foundation's education project in Oswiecim, as well as continued support for the annual NGO-sponsored "Days of Tolerance" in Kolobrzeg, an event that brought together youths of various religious and ethnic backgrounds from many countries. The majority of events conducted in Krakow's "Partnership for Democracy" (formerly called "Bridges to the East") featured nonviolence and tolerance as integral parts of the presentations.

As part of the embassy's overall program promoting religious tolerance, Villanova Professor Hibba Abugideiri visited the country March 21-24, 2006, in order to discuss Islam in America and the role of American Muslim Women in U.S. society. Abugideiri's activities included speaking engagements at the Oriental Studies Department of Warsaw University, a lecture for an MBA class at the Warsaw Economics and Trade School (SGH), a speaking engagement co-organized with Warsaw's leading women's activist group "Feminoteka," a speech to international high school students at the American School in Warsaw, and a presentation at the U.S. Embassy as part of the embassy's "America Presents" program.

In May 2006, at the request of the Government, the embassy collaborated with police to identify individuals associated with the Blood and Honor website, leading to several arrests.

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