

IRELAND 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion and prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion. Based on a constitutional provision, the law makes blasphemy a punishable offense. The government said it was committed to holding a referendum on the possibility of removing this constitutional provision.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) called on the government to pass hate crime legislation to include religiously based hate crimes. The government permitted, but did not require, religious instruction in public schools. In January the then-minister for education abolished a 50-year-old official rule that said religious instruction was the most important part of the school curriculum. Religious patrons continued to define the ethos of most schools and determine the development and implementation of religious education in primary schools. Most schools are privately owned but publicly funded, and the law permits over-enrolled schools with a religious patron to discriminate in admissions on the basis of religion. Parents of non-Catholic children reported difficulty enrolling their children in local schools, which in most cases were Catholic. In June Minister for Education Richard Bruton said he wanted to accelerate divestment – the process of denominational schools becoming nondenominational – of Catholic primary schools, but none were divested during the year.

In May a group of four men physically and verbally attacked two young Afghan men and a 13-year-old Afghan boy. In November a Dutch man made anti-Semitic statements and threats to his neighbors in Cork. The association Atheist Ireland stated secular and minority religious students were compelled to take Catholic religious education in schools, despite rules making such courses optional. There were reports of assaults against Muslims. The group PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West), announced it had opened a branch in the country to protest the presence of Muslims the country.

U.S. embassy officials, in support of religious freedom goals, discussed with the government discrimination and integration of religious minorities into the community. Underscoring the importance of tolerance, diversity, and religious freedom, embassy officials met with religious groups and NGOs to discuss the religious issues they confronted. The Ambassador hosted a lunch for interfaith leaders focused on tolerance and how faith communities could support the integration of religious minority refugees and asylum seekers into society.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.9 million (July 2016 estimate). The most recent census data available (2011) indicates the population is approximately 84 percent Roman Catholic, 3 percent Church of Ireland (Protestant), 1 percent Muslim, 1 percent Orthodox Christian (including Greek, Russian, and Coptic Orthodox), and 1 percent unspecified Christian, with 6 percent stating no religious affiliation. There are small numbers of Presbyterians and Jews. According to the 2011 census, the Jewish community numbers approximately 2,000. The number of Christians and Muslims from sub-Saharan Africa, Muslims from North Africa and the Middle East, Muslims and Hindus from South Asia, and Orthodox Christians from Eastern Europe continues to grow, especially in larger urban areas.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion, subject to public order and morality. The constitution prohibits promotion of one religious group over another, as well as discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief. The law does not restrict the teaching or practice of any faith.

The constitution makes blasphemy a punishable offense, although it was last prosecuted in 1855. The law makes it an offense, punishable by a fine of up to 25,000 euros (\$27,203), to utter or publish material that is “grossly abusive or insulting in relation to matters held sacred by any religion” when the intent and result are “outrage among a substantial number of the adherents of that religion.”

There is no legal requirement for religious groups to register with the government, nor is there any formal mechanism for government recognition of a religious group. Religious groups may apply to the Revenue Commissioners and register as a charity or an NGO to receive tax exemption benefits.

Under the constitution, the Department of Education provides funding to all public schools, which can be government owned or privately owned but publicly funded. Most schools are privately owned but publicly funded, with the government paying most of the building and administrative costs, teachers’ salaries and a set amount per pupil. In funding schools, the government is mindful of the “rights of parents, especially in the matter of religious and moral formation.”

Almost all primary schools and about half of the secondary schools are religiously affiliated. At the primary level, 90 percent of all schools are Catholic, 6 percent Church of Ireland, 2 percent multid denominational, 1 percent other religious groups, and 1 percent are not religiously affiliated. Most school boards are appointed by patrons, similar to trustees, who are usually members of religious groups. These groups often provide land for schools and also contribute to building and administrative costs. The law permits schools with a religious patron to discriminate in admissions on the basis of religion.

The government permitted, but did not require, religious instruction, faith-based classes or general religion classes, in public schools. Although religious instruction was part of the curriculum of most schools, parents could exempt their children from such instruction. Catholic majority schools teach about Catholicism but multid denominational schools generally teach about religion in a broader context. Students who opt out sit in another classroom. The government funds salaries for those teachers who teach a religion class in public schools.

The Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) hears cases of reported workplace discrimination, including on the basis of religion. The WRC may refer cases for mediation or investigate or decide the case itself. If the adjudication officer finds there has been discrimination he or she can order compensation for the effects of discrimination and/or corrective action.

The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission is an independent public body accountable to the parliament, whose purpose is to protect and promote human rights and equality and to build a culture of respect for human rights, including religious freedom, equality, and intercultural understanding across society. The commission works at the policy level to review the effectiveness of human rights and equality law, and policy and practice in the state and within public bodies. It also works with communities, including religious groups, and other civil society groups to monitor and report on the public's experiences of human rights, religious freedom, and equality.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

In August the new government formed in May said it was committed to holding a constitutional referendum, after completing consultations and preparing the

necessary legislation, on the question of whether to revoke the constitutional provision making blasphemy a punishable offense.

In January then-Minister for Education Jan O’Sullivan abolished a 50-year-old official rule giving religion a privileged status in schools: “Of all the parts of the school curriculum religious instruction is by far the most important, as its subject-matter, God’s honor and service, includes the proper use of all man’s faculties, and affords the most powerful inducements to their proper use.” Previously, 30 minutes of each primary school day were allocated for religious education, which often consisted of teaching about the religious group of the school’s patron. Equate, an NGO for children’s rights that advocates for changes in primary and secondary school education, said the abolition of the rule was “a very significant moment for education reform.”

In September the Archbishop of Dublin said that the process of divestment – the process of denominational schools becoming nondenominational – was too slow. He also said he did not believe it was appropriate for school enrollment to depend on a baptismal certificate. In June Minister for Education Richard Bruton said he wanted to accelerate the divestment of some Catholic primary schools, but there were no schools divested during the year. He outlined plans to provide an average of 20 new multid denominational and nondenominational schools per year by 2030. The government began to open more schools with nonreligious patronage. The New Schools Establishment Group advised Minister Bruton on patronage of new schools to be established. In November the minister announced nine new post-primary schools (total of 8,200 places) would be established in 2017 and 2018, under the patronage of nondenominational groups Educate Together and the Education and Training Boards (statutorily based local authorities) as recommended by the New Schools Establishment Group. Five new nondenominational primary schools opened in September including four Educate Together schools. A similar number is to open in September 2017 and 2018 but no decision has yet been made on who should run the new schools.

School patrons, generally affiliated with religious denominations, continued to define the ethos of the schools and determine the development and implementation of religious education curriculum in primary schools. The curriculum varied by school and could include teaching about the patron’s religion, the religious history of the country, or an overview of world religions. The NGO Equate released the results of a survey conducted in 2015 in which 87 percent of respondents agreed the government had a responsibility to ensure children did not experience religious discrimination in school curricula and 84 percent agreed the education system

should be reformed so no child was excluded because of his or her religion or lack of religion.

Parents of non-baptized children continued to report difficulty in enrolling in some local, religiously based schools that were oversubscribed because schools were allowed to accept Catholic children first. In rural areas, parents said finding alternatives to schools with Catholic patrons was especially difficult. According to the media website *TheJournal.ie*, parents were angry with the slow divestment process and reported feeling they had no other option than to have their children baptized in order to obtain admission into their only local school, which in most cases was Catholic. Other parents said they refused to baptize their children and demanded the provision of a baptismal certificate be dropped as a requirement for school enrollment. In a January compliance review of the country by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the committee raised concerns at the small number of nondenominational schools in the country and with discriminatory practices in admissions policies on the basis of a child's religion. The NGO Education Equality organized a march, which gathered 600 participants, in July to call for equality in the provision of education regardless of religion.

In December Lord Mayor of Dublin Brendan Carr launched a Dublin City Interfaith Charter to promote religious freedom, interfaith dialogue, and religious diversity in Dublin. The charter was signed by members of the Bahai, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish and Sikh communities.

Several state agencies, including the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and the Garda (national police) Racial and Intercultural Office (GRIO), continued to enforce equality legislation and worked on behalf of minority religious groups. They organized community events to include individuals of diverse faiths and reviewed legislation about religious hate crimes, among other topics. The GRIO's liaison officers continued to engage with immigrant minority religious groups on a regular basis to inform them of police services and educate them on their rights. They supported integration by involving members of ethnic and religious minority communities in community social events. For example, in July Garda officers attended an interfaith celebration to mark the end of Ramadan in Cork.

On January 24, the prime minister, the foreign minister, and other senior government officials participated in the national Holocaust Day Memorial commemoration organized by the Holocaust Education Trust Ireland, in association with the Department of Justice and Equality, the Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration, and Dublin City Council.

The government is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. According to media reports, on May 5, a group of four men physically and verbally attacked two young Afghan men and a 13-year-old Afghan boy as they were cycling home. The victims said the men who attacked them shouted “Why are you here? Go back to your country,” and used an obscenity about their being Muslim. The Garda investigated the incident and charged one of the four men, Joseph Connors, with assault. The case was pending at year’s end. On May 10, about 200 people held a demonstration in solidarity with the victims of the attack.

In June an assailant attacked Imam Ihab Ahmed of the Cork Mosque Foundation, pushing him to the ground and stealing his *taqiyah* (skull cap). The imam said he believed the attack was religiously motivated, according to media reports. Other religious leaders in Cork, such as the Church of Ireland’s Bishop of Cork, condemned the attack. The Garda treated the incident as a theft.

On November 14, a Dutch man made anti-Semitic threats and behaved “erratically” towards his neighbors in Cork. According to the neighbors, the man called them Zionists, threatened to behead Jews, and rubbed his hand against one of the neighbors’ throat. The man was arrested and faced charges of making threats to kill or cause serious harm. He was refused bail and a judge ordered him to undergo a psychiatric assessment while in custody.

The Irish Council for Civil Liberties, Immigrant Council of Ireland, Anti-Racism Network Ireland, and the European Network Against Racism Ireland lobbied for legislation against hate crimes including religiously motivated hate crimes, or to ensure prejudice was taken into account as an aggravating factor when sentencing criminals. The NGOs stated the country was the only western democracy without specific hate crime legislation. A report published by the association Atheist Ireland stated secular and minority religious students were compelled to take Catholic religious education in schools, despite rules making such courses optional. Association member John Hamill said many parents had been told religion was a core subject and that students who opted out of these classes would be forced to sit in the back of the classroom with no alternative coursework to

study. According to *TheJournal.ie*, the activities of a nonreligious child in a religion class varied from school to school. The site stated the separation of children from their peers was not just difficult for children and their parents but often for the schools as well, given the limitations of extra supervision. “There are no alternatives available as this is a primary school where each class teacher gives religious instruction to his/her own class,” said Principal of Scoil Mhuire Ben Dorney.

A Syrian refugee complained about a requirement that all students who take the Arabic exam must study the Quran for their final high school examinations. The refugee, whose daughter is Christian, said the requirement was unfair and discriminatory. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment said the Quran was included on the basis of its linguistic and literary value and not because of its association with religion. The council said the syllabus would be reviewed and would consider the “range and sources” of the prescribed Quranic texts in the exam.

PEGIDA announced the opening of an Irish branch at a Dublin rally in February, to protest the growth of Islam in Europe. Cofounder of the unregistered political party Identity Ireland, Peter O’Laughlin, stated PEGIDA “is giving the people of Europe a chance to speak out and have a voice against the absolutely disastrous policies of the EU.” Hundreds of antiracism and migrant support groups held a counter rally to protest the establishment of PEGIDA. There were reports of assaults between the counter protesters and PEGIDA supporters when scuffles broke out. Members of the Garda Public Order Unit intervened to prevent violence.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

In support of religious freedom goals, U.S. embassy officials discussed the integration of religious minorities and incidents of discrimination with representatives of the Human Rights Unit of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Department of Education and Skills, and the Garda.

Embassy representatives discussed with religious groups and NGOs the importance of promoting tolerance and diversity and the challenges of religious minorities, including crime, integration, education admissions policy, and practicing their faith in security.

In January the Ambassador hosted a lunch for interfaith leaders that focused on tolerance and diversity, and underscored efforts to engage faith communities, including Catholic, Church of Ireland, Muslim, Hindu, and Jewish groups, to support the integration of refugees and asylum seekers, some of whom were member of religious minorities, into society.