

# ICELAND 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religious belief and practice, as long as it is not prejudicial to good morals or public order, and protects the right to form religious associations. It names Lutheranism as the state religion. The state provides the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) with financial support and benefits not available to other religious groups. Parliament repealed an antiblasphemy law in July. Religious and secular humanist or other “lifestyle” groups must register to receive state subsidies.

An online poll on public attitudes toward the construction of houses of worship showed 37.6 percent of respondents opposed the erection of a mosque, while 27 percent opposed building a Russian Orthodox church, 21 percent were against building a Buddhist temple, and 11.9 percent against the construction of a pagan temple. The Forum for Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation sponsored programs to strengthen dialogue between religious groups and lifestyle organizations.

U.S. embassy officials regularly engaged with government representatives, who agreed on the importance of respecting religious freedom. Embassy officials also maintained regular contact with representatives of religious groups to discuss religious freedom, including outreach to the Icelandic Asatru Association, the Russian Orthodox Church, and Sidmennt – the Icelandic Ethical Humanist Association.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 332,000 (July 2015 estimate). According to the national statistical institute, approximately 74 percent of the population belongs to the ELC, and 5.9 percent belongs to Lutheran Free Churches. Approximately 14.5 percent of the population belongs to other religious as well as “lifestyle” groups. The largest non-Lutheran group is the Roman Catholic Church, with 3.6 percent of the population. Approximately 5.6 percent do not identify with any religious or lifestyle group. The Association of Muslims in Iceland estimates there are 1,000 to 1,500 Muslims in the country. The Jewish community reports there are approximately 100 Jews. Foreigners constitute an estimated 80 percent of the Catholic population, mostly from Poland, other European countries, and the Philippines.

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### Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

#### Legal Framework

The constitution states all individuals have the right to form religious associations and practice religion in accordance with their personal beliefs, as long as nothing is “preached or practiced which is prejudicial to good morals or public order.” It stipulates everyone has the right to remain outside religious associations and no one shall be required to pay any personal dues to any religious association of which he or she is not a member. The constitution also specifies individuals may not lose their civil or national rights or refuse to perform civic duties on religious grounds. The constitution bans only religious teachings or practices harmful to good morals or the public order. The law further specifies the right of individuals to choose or change their religion.

The official state religion is Lutheranism. The constitution establishes the ELC as the national church and grants it state support and protection. The law grants the ELC official legal status, and the government directly funds the Church from the state budget. This is in addition to the indirect funding the ELC receives along with other registered religious and lifestyle groups from church taxes.

The penal code establishes fines and up to two years’ imprisonment for hate speech, including mocking, defaming, denigrating, or threatening an individual or group by comments, pictures, or symbols based on religion. In July parliament repealed a separate provision of the penal code prohibiting blasphemy. Previously the blasphemy law had established fines and imprisonment of up to three months for those who publicly derided or belittled the religious doctrines or the worship of a “lawfully existing religious community” active in the country.

Religious groups, other than the ELC, and lifestyle organizations apply for recognition and registration to a district commissioner, who forwards the application to the Ministry of the Interior (MOI). By law the minister of the interior appoints a four-member panel to review the applications. The chairman of the panel is nominated by a university faculty of law, and the other three members are nominated by the University of Iceland’s Departments of Social and Human Sciences, Theology and Religious Studies, and History and Philosophy, respectively. To register, a religious group must “practice a creed or religion” and a lifestyle organization must operate in accordance with certain ethical values, and “deal with ethics or epistemology in a prescribed manner.” Religious groups and

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secular humanist organizations must also “be well established;” “be active and stable;” “not have a purpose that violates the law or is prejudicial to good morals or public order;” and have “a core group of members who participate in its operations, support the values of the organization in compliance with its teachings it was founded on, and pay church taxes in accordance with the law on church taxes.”

The law also specifies the leader of a religious group or a lifestyle organization must be at least 25 years old and fulfill the general requirements of holding a public position. These include being physically and mentally healthy and financially sound, and having a clean criminal record and the general and specialized education legally required for the position. Unlike the requirements for most public positions, the religious group leader need not be a citizen or have legal domicile in the country. All registered religious groups and lifestyle organizations must submit an annual report to a district commissioner describing the group’s operations during the previous year. Religious groups and lifestyle organizations are required to perform state-sanctioned functions such as marriages and the official naming of children and also preside over other ceremonies such as funerals. The law places no restrictions or requirements on unregistered religious groups, but they cannot carry out legally recognized ceremonies such as marriages or receive any state funds.

The law provides state subsidies to registered religious groups and lifestyle organizations. For each individual 16 years of age and older who belongs to any one of the officially registered and recognized religious groups and lifestyle organizations, the government allocates an annual payment of 9,888 kronur (ISK) (\$76.25) out of income taxes, called the “church tax,” to the individual’s respective organization.

By law a child’s affiliation, or nonaffiliation, with a registered religious or secular humanist group is as follows: (1) if the parents are married or in registered cohabitation and both belong to either the same registered organization or no organization, then the child’s affiliation shall be the same as its parents; (2) if the parents are married or in registered cohabitation, but have different affiliations or if one parent is nonaffiliated, then the parents shall make a joint decision on what organization, if any, the child should be affiliated with; until the parents make this decision, the child shall remain nonaffiliated; (3) if the parents are not married or not in registered cohabitation when the child is born, the child shall be affiliated with the same registered organization, if any, as the parent who has custody over

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the child. Change in affiliation of children under age 16 requires the consent of both parents if both have custody; if only one parent has custody, the consent of the noncustodial parent is not required. The law requires parents to consult their children about any changes in the child's affiliation between age 12 and 16.

By law, school grades one through 10 (ages six-15) in public and private schools must include instruction in social studies, which includes subjects such as Christianity, ethics, and theology. The law also mandates "the Christian heritage of Icelandic culture, equality, responsibility, concern, tolerance, and respect for human value" shape general teaching practices. The compulsory curriculum for Christianity, ethics, and theology takes a multicultural approach to religious education and emphasizes teaching a variety of beliefs.

By law, school authorities may exempt pupils from compulsory instruction in Christianity, ethics, and theology. To exempt students, parents must submit a written application to the school principal. The principal may request additional information if necessary. The principal then registers the application as a "special case" and writes an official response to the parents, accepting or denying the request. School authorities are not required to offer other religious or secular instruction in place of these classes.

Of the 12 largest municipalities in the country, eight have adopted guidelines or rules governing the interaction between schools and religious/lifestyle groups. The Reykjavik City Council prohibits religious and lifestyle groups from conducting any activities, including the distribution of proselytizing material, in municipal preschools and compulsory schools (grades one through 10) during school hours, or during afterschool programs. Reykjavik school administrators, however, can invite the representatives of religious and secular humanist groups to visit the compulsory classes on Christianity, ethics, and theology and on life skills. These visits must be under the guidance of a teacher and in accordance with the curriculum. Any student visits to the gathering places of religious and lifestyle groups during school hours must be under the guidance of a teacher as part of a class on religion and lifestyle views. During such classes or visits, students may only observe rituals, not participate in them. The municipality of Hafnarfjordur has similar rules governing the interaction between schools and religious/lifestyle organizations. The other six municipalities have either adopted or adapted guidelines on these interactions that the Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture has set. The ministry's guidelines are broadly similar to those of Reykjavik and Hafnarfjordur.

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### Government Practices

Following repeal of the penal code provision prohibiting blasphemy, some members of parliament stated the distinction between religious hate speech, which remains prohibited, and blasphemy was unclear.

Two groups submitted registration applications in December. One group, Ananda Marga, applied as a lifestyle organization, and another group, the Rastafarian Religious Organization, applied as a religious organization; the district commissioner had not issued a decision on the two applications by the end of the year. In December 2014, the district commissioner approved the registration application of the secular humanist organization the New Avalon Center.

In April the District Court of Northeast Iceland upheld the MOI's decision that Akureyri school officials had illegally dismissed a grade school teacher after parents of students complained about his personal blog in 2012. In the blog, the teacher had highlighted what he considered to be justification in the Bible for his antihomosexual views. The mayor of Akureyri stated the school had dismissed the teacher based on his job performance and not because of the expression of his religious beliefs. The town of Akureyri appealed the district court's ruling to the Supreme Court, where the case was pending at year's end.

According to government policy, individuals who applied for a passport at a district commissioner's office needed to present proof of religion from a religious organization if they wished to receive an exemption on religious grounds allowing them to wear a head covering for their passport photographs.

The government provided the ELC with approximately ISK 5.11 billion (\$39.4 million), consisting of direct subsidies from the state budget as well as indirect funding from church taxes. The church tax also provided a total of ISK 324 million (\$2.5 million) to the other recognized religious and lifestyle groups. The ELC operated all cemeteries, and all religious and lifestyle groups had equal access to them. The ELC and the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the state-owned University of Iceland had a cooperative agreement on training theology students for positions within the ELC.

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The state directly paid the salaries of the 130 ministers in the ELC, who were considered public servants under the MOI. State radio broadcast Lutheran worship services every Sunday morning as well as daily morning and evening devotions.

After the Saudi Arabian Ambassador told President Olafur Ragnar Grimsson in March that the Saudi government planned to contribute more than \$1 million to the building of a new mosque in Reykjavik, Reykjavik Mayor Dagur Eggertsson instructed the city's human rights office to draft a report on the Saudi contribution and on what rules applied to foreign financial contributions to Muslim organizations. The report had not been published by the end of the year.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. In September Market and Media Research, a well-known market research company, conducted an online survey about public attitudes towards the construction of houses of worship. The firm emailed an invitation to participate in the survey to a portion of its pool of volunteer respondents assembled from the country's national registry, resulting in responses from 986 individuals. The poll showed 37.6 percent of the respondents opposed the erection of a mosque while 32 percent were in favor. The same poll registered 27 percent of respondents as being against the building of a Russian Orthodox church, while 33.4 percent approved of it; 21 percent disapproved of the building of a Buddhist temple, while 39.4 percent were in favor; and 11.9 percent opposed the construction of a pagan temple, while 50.5 percent approved. The poll also showed that 8.5 percent disapproved of the building of additional ELC churches, while 67.2 percent approved.

The newspaper *DV* reported on November 22 that a prospective landlady had turned down a Palestinian refugee seeking to rent an apartment for herself and her two children. When the apartment owner learned the Palestinian woman was Muslim, she reportedly texted her, "I don't rent muslims [sic], PAR'IS [sic]."

Imam Ahmad Seddeeq of the Islamic Center of Iceland reported to the police that unknown individuals defaced the center on November 21 by painting words and symbols on the building. The symbols were similar to graffiti painted at other, nonreligious sites in Reykjavik. The imam said in an interview on November 22 that the incident may have been related to remarks President Grimsson made in a November press interview, in which he reminded his audience of the more than \$1

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million Saudi Arabia was providing to build a mosque in the country. The imam also said he had sensed increased prejudice against Muslims in the country, especially since the November 13 attacks in Paris.

The Forum for Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation, whose membership consisted of a large number of registered religious groups, including the ELC, Muslim, Buddhist, and Protestant, Catholic, and other minority Christian groups, met bimonthly. Its stated goal was to foster dialogue and strengthen links between religious groups and lifestyle organizations. Any registered religious or lifestyle group could join, as well as unregistered religious and lifestyle groups approved by pre-existing members. No lifestyle groups had joined the forum at year's end.

The ELC employed a minister to serve immigrant communities and help recent arrivals of all religious groups integrate into society.

In March the Asatru Association, comprised of followers of traditional Norse beliefs and practices, broke ground for the construction of a temple in Reykjavik.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

U.S. embassy representatives regularly engaged with officials from the MOI, who agreed on the importance of respecting religious freedom. Embassy officials also met with representatives of a broad spectrum of religious organizations, including the Asatru Association, the Russian Orthodox Church, and Sidmennt – the Icelandic Ethical Humanist Association – as well as nongovernmental organizations such as the Icelandic Human Rights Center to discuss the importance of religious tolerance.