



Religion

Population

Area

- Christians : **67.7%**
- Agnostics : **18.6%**
- Muslims : **3.1%**
- Atheists : **2.6%**
- Chinese folk religionists : **1.9%**
- Buddhists : **1.7%**
- Others : **4.5%**

36,286,000

9,984,670 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The constitution and laws of Canada guarantee freedom of conscience and religion, as well as thought, belief, opinion and expression,^[1] subject to “reasonable limits prescribed by law as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society”.^[2] Canadians have the right to “equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination” based on religion.^[3]

Federal and provincial laws prohibit discrimination on the grounds of religion, permit individuals to sue for violations of religious freedom, and provide remedies for complaints.^[4]

Religious groups are not required to register with the government. However, to receive tax-exempt status religious groups must register as non-profit organisations with the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA). Charitable status grants the clergy access to a number of federal benefits, such as tax deductions for resident clergy and faster immigration procedures^[5]

The constitution guarantees the right of Protestant and Catholic minorities to publicly funded denominational schools. Constitutional amendments repealed this guarantee in Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador and replaced them with a secular public education system. Constitutionally protected public funding for Catholic schools remains in place in Ontario, Alberta, and Saskatchewan. Federal law protects publicly funded Catholic and Protestant minority education in the Northwest Territories, Yukon, and Nunavut.^[6] Six of the 10 provinces provide at least partial funding to some religious schools.^[7] Home-schooling is legal across Canada and financial support is provided to parents in Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia.^[8]

In November 2016, an Ontario court rejected a father’s complaint that his religious freedom was violated when the school board failed to provide advance notice of the school’s sexual education curriculum. He argued that without notice, he

lacked the information to determine whether the content conflicted with his Christian views. The judge dismissed the complaint, saying inclusion and equality come before “individual religious accommodations in public education”^[9]

In late November 2017 the Supreme Court heard the case of Trinity Western University’s (TWU) challenge of the refusal of law societies to accredit graduates from its law programme because of its Community Covenant which states that sexual intimacy must be confined to the traditional definition of marriage. The licensing bodies for attorneys of British Columbia, Ontario, and Nova Scotia claimed that the covenant was discriminatory to the LGBT+ community. The Supreme Court heard two appeals together: one from the Law Society of British Columbia and one from TWU^[10] Lawyers for TWU argued that a ruling against the university “could ultimately impact all faith-based schools, charities, and organizations.”^[11] A decision was expected in the late spring or summer of 2018.

In March 2018, a court rejected a challenge to the provisions proscribing polygamy in the Criminal Code^[12] on religious freedom grounds by two members of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, who had been found guilty of polygamy in British Columbia in July 2017.^[13]

Quebec passed a law in October 2017 banning face coverings for those giving or receiving public services “so as to ensure quality communication between persons and allow their identity to be verified, and for security purposes”^[14] The law also set forth circumstances under which “accommodations on religious grounds” may be granted, including that “the request is serious”, “is consistent . . . with religious neutrality”, and “reasonable in that it does not impose undue hardship”.^[15]

Several groups challenged the law after it passed and in December 2017, a Quebec judge stayed the face-covering ban until the province established clear guidelines for religious accommodation.^[16]

In June 2016, a coalition of groups representing more than 4,700 Christian doctors filed a request for judicial review of Ontario’s requirement that they refer patients to physicians willing to provide assisted death, arguing the referrals make them complicit in the act and violated constitutional guarantees of freedom of conscience and religion. The challenge followed enactment of a federal law legalising assisted death but with a conscientious objection provision. Ontario was the only province to require a referral to another physician rather than to a registry.^[17]

On 31st January 2018 the court agreed the Ontario requirement infringed “the rights of religious freedom” of the physicians, but said it was justified because of the importance of providing access to the service. The president of one of physicians’ organisations said: “This decision... raises alarm bells to all health care workers and Ontario residents that their freedom of religion and conscience could also be jeopardised.”^[18]

A coalition of Muslim, Jewish and Christian leaders met with government officials in March 2018 to object to the Canada Summer Jobs funding application procedure which requires “both the job and the organisation’s core mandate respect individual human rights in Canada, including the values underlying the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms... [which includes] reproductive rights [i.e. abortion]”^[19] They wrote in a letter of January 2018: “The promise of a free and democratic society is that there be no religious or ideological test or conditions to receiving government benefit or protection”.^[20] A constitutional challenge in the Federal Court was scheduled for June 2018.^[21]

Incidents

Official hate crime figures recorded by police in 2016 (the most recent available at time of writing) included 221 crimes determined to be motivated by anti-Semitism. Civil society organisations reported to the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) 171 anti-Semitic incidents, with 160 attacks against property, one threat, and 10 violent attacks against people.^[22]

The B’nai B’rith Canada League for Human Rights received 1,728 reports of anti-Semitic incidents in 2016, marking a 26 percent increase from the previous year and the highest number of incidents since B’nai B’rith began its survey^[23]

Incidents just in Ontario in 2016 included: a man being arrested for threatening the Jewish community in June; swastikas painted on a billboard in July; and in November a swastika daubed on a rabbi's front door.^[24]

In November 2016, a Jewish school, a synagogue, and a rabbi's home in Ottawa were vandalised with anti-Semitic graffiti within the space of a week. A mosque and church were also targeted.^[25]

Several pieces of anti-Semitic graffiti, including the phrase "Hitler was right", were daubed on a highway overpass in Toronto. These were reported in the summer and early autumn of 2017.^[26]

Synagogues in Toronto, Edmonton, Montreal, Hamilton, and Calgary all received hate mail in December 2017. Police hate crimes units in these cities coordinated efforts to investigate.^[27]

In March 2018 a Montreal petrol station owner apologised to a Jewish customer after an employee insulted the man with anti-Semitic language. The employee was fired.^[28]

Official hate crime figures recorded by police in 2016 included 139 anti-Muslim crimes: the National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM) submitted data to the OSCE about 43 anti-Muslim incidents.^[29]

The NCCM reports that a number of incidents occurred during 2016: a pig's head was left at a mosque in Quebec City in June; a Muslim woman wearing a headscarf was insulted, spat at and had her headscarf pulled at while shopping in Ontario in June; an air rifle was used to fire through an Ontario mosque window while children were studying inside in July; a Vancouver mosque was targeted in attempted arson in September; in October, the glass door to an Islamic centre in South Calgary was broken and a burnt Qur'an and a hate letter were left at the scene; and in November, the head of a Muslim organisation, based in Quebec, received death threats.^[30]

On 29th January 2017, Alexandre Bissonnette, a 27-year-old university student,^[31] opened fire inside the Quebec Islamic Cultural Centre during evening prayers. Six men were killed and five were critically wounded. Bissonnette entered a guilty plea to six counts of first-degree murder and six of attempted murder on 28th March 2018.^[32]

A man was arrested in March 2017 after a letter containing a bomb threat targeting Muslim students at Concordia University was sent to Montreal media outlets.^[33]

The same Quebec Islamic Cultural Centre, where six people were shot in January 2017, received a package containing a defaced Qur'an and a note saying the Muslim community should use a hog farm for a cemetery in July 2017.^[34] In August, the car of the centre's president was set on fire and the centre's doors were smeared with excrement.^[35]

In December 2017 a Colombian man, mistaken for being Muslim, was beaten with a baseball bat and insulted by a man yelling "ISIS" (e.g. Islamic State or Daesh) and "terrorist".^[36]

The sign outside an Islamic centre, which was under construction, was defaced with derogatory ISIS graffiti in February 2018.^[37]

Official hate crime figures recorded by police in 2016 (the most recent available at time of writing) included 27 crimes motivated by bias against Christians.^[38]

A man was charged with arson and mischief after throwing a "small firebomb" through the window of a church in Toronto on Easter morning 2017.^[39]

Two churches in Ontario were vandalised with graffiti in August 2017, one with a racist message and the second with the words "Islamic State".^[40]

In November 2017, a church in British Columbia was defaced with the words "Kill All Christians", less than a week after 26 people were killed in a Baptist church in Texas. It was the second incident of vandalism in a week.^[41] A British Columbia church was vandalised with fake blood in November 2017 after being the target of previous vandalism in

August.^[42]

A small New Brunswick church was attacked by vandals who broke windows, damaged furniture, stepped on communion bread, and smashed the piano in late November 2017.^[43]

On Easter 2018 vandalism with vulgar anti-Christian messages was discovered painted on two Catholic churches in Halifax.^[44]

Prospects for freedom of religion

New or increased governmental restrictions on religious freedom during the period under review may have a negative impact on both majority and minority religions over the next two years. There appears to be an increased risk of societal intolerance against minority religions, some of which may be a backlash to global terrorism or geopolitical conflicts attributed to religious groups, as well as anti-immigration sentiments in Canada.

Endnotes / Sources

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