



Religion

Population

Area

- Christians : **92.1%**
- Agnostics : **6.2%**
- Muslims : **1.0%**
- Others : **0.7%**

4,714,000

69,797 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The protection of religious freedom in the Republic of Ireland is legally guaranteed at both a national level, under the Constitution of Ireland,^[1] and a supranational level, under the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union^[2] Article 44.2 of the Irish constitution protects freedom of conscience, profession and practice of religion.

The state also makes guarantees not to endow any religion nor make adherence to any religion grounds for discrimination. There is an important guarantee that all religions have the right to buy and maintain educational and charitable institutes and to manage their own business and property without state interference. The freedom for people to convert, proselytise and educate others (including their children) in any religion is legally upheld in Ireland^[3] Broadly speaking, state protection of religious worship and expression remains comparatively advanced by international standards.

The country will be holding a referendum on the repeal of article 40.6.1 of the Irish constitution which governs Irish legislation for blasphemy, defining it as a “matter that is grossly abusive or insulting in relation to matters held sacred by any religion, thereby causing outrage among a substantial number of the adherents of that religion.”^[4]

It is difficult to gauge reliable figures of religious discrimination in Ireland as there is evidence that Garda statistics are unreliable, untrustworthy^[5] and, in some cases, scandalous.^[6] However, there is compelling evidence of pervasive and deepening anti-Catholic bias in Ireland's mainstream media and political establishment.^[7] This has been particularly evident in the treatment and demands made of both the boards and patrons of Catholic hospitals – in the wake of the Irish public's repeal of the 8th Amendment^[8] (which gave constitutional and legal protection to the unborn child). Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Leo Varadkar has stated that in regards to respecting Catholic beliefs and teaching in Catholic institutions that receive state funding:

it will not, however, be possible for publicly funded hospitals, no matter who their patron or owner is, to opt out of providing these necessary services (abortion for any reason up to 12 week gestation) which will be legal in this state once this legislation is passed by the Dail and Seanad...I'm happy to give you (the Oireachtas or Parliament of Ireland) that assurance...That legislation will allow individuals to opt out based on their consciences or their religious convictions but will not allow institutions to do so.^[9]

While the state provides universally free primary education, the majority control of Ireland's primary schools is with Christian religious denominations (96 percent) – with the Catholic Church owning or patronising some 90 percent^[10] This has been a source of increasingly antagonistic political opposition and social protest.^[11] Denominational schools are permitted to fulfil their purpose (educating the children of their own faith community) by admitting children of their own faith ahead of other children in the event of over-enrolment but this right is coming under heavy pressure, including from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's (UNCRC).^[12] Additionally, the right of religious organisations, including faith schools, to employ staff who will respect and uphold the ethos of their employer has been curtailed via an amendment to section 37 of the Employment Equality Act.^[13]

In May 2018,^[14] an Education Bill was introduced in the Irish Parliament which rescinded the so-called 'baptism-barrier' that was initially set up to ensure that only those people who professed the religious ethos of the school could attend (it was passed just outside of the time scale covered by this report in July 2018). From September 2019, most primary schools will not be able to give priority access to children on the basis of their religion. The majority of primary schools in the state – just over 90 per cent – are of a Catholic ethos. The School Admissions Bill prohibits these schools from giving enrolment priority to baptised children in cases where they are over-subscribed. However, minority faiths will still be allowed to prioritise members of their religion to protect their ethos in cases where they are over-subscribed. This exclusion, according to the Minister for Education Richard Bruton, has been introduced to help ensure children of minority faiths access a school of their own religion, but this provision will be reviewed after three years.

Incidents

Related to Christianity

In October 2017^[15], the Holy Trinity Church, a Church of Ireland church, in Connemara was extensively damaged by vandals with its interiors ruined, windows smashed, electrics ripped out of the walls, and the pulpit, pews and organ all destroyed.

The Catholic Archbishop of Tuam Michael Neary described the destruction as “an act of persecution against all Christians” further observing that:

the Holy Bible [was] thrown out the window; the Cross [was] being used as a weapon to smash items; overturned and broken pews; damage to the altar; the pulpit; the organ; and the lights ripped out. This damage is not just a criminal act: rather it is an act motivated by anti-Christian sentiment and is a challenge to freedom of religious expression in Ireland today. Religious freedom is at the heart of human rights and not without cost. In too many countries, places of worship are being destroyed and people are being killed and persecuted for their religious beliefs.

In April 2018,^[16] 37-year old Jamie O'Connor told parish priest Father Tom Hogan that he would cut his throat in the Church grounds of St Peter and Paul Cathedral in Ennis, County Clare. In his statement to Gardai on the assault, Father Hogan noted that "I was fearful for my own safety in a way that I have never been before during my 20 years in Ennis." This incident, as with those noted in ACN's Religious Freedom in the World report 2014 – 2016, is representative of an increasing amount of anti-social incidents taking place within Churches against worshippers^[17] or indeed sacrilegious acts in Christian places of worship.^[18]

Related to Islam

Overall, the total recorded number of anti-Islamic incidents in Ireland remain rare, which is noteworthy considering that officially Islam has been Ireland's third largest religion since 2016.^[19] However, there are still isolated incidents that represent a wider struggle for integration between Irish communities and Muslim immigrants across the island of Ireland. For example, in August of 2017, a pig's head was dumped outside of a mosque in Newtownards, County Down^[20] and in October 2017 in Dublin, a Muslim schoolgirl's veil was torn from her face and she was subject to serious verbal abuse^[21]

Related to Judaism

The Jewish population of Ireland, though numbering only 1,600,^[22] are successful and historically well-integrated and respected in Irish society. There has however been a growing and persistent left-wing association with Islamist, anti-Semitic movements in Ireland and abroad.^[23] Concerns were expressed after a bill was considered by Ireland's Senate that would criminalise trade with east Jerusalem, the Golan Heights and the West Bank in January 2018. The bill orders that any Irish citizen found guilty of engaging in trade with areas of Israel beyond the pre-1967 lines could be jailed for up to five years and fined up to €250,000^[24]

Prospects for Freedom of Religion

From June 2016 to June 2018 evidence suggests that religious freedom in Ireland decreased slightly, partly given the rapid cultural and moral upheaval evidenced through constitutional and legislative changes made with regards abortion and homosexual marriage alongside an increasingly bold social, political and media antipathy towards Catholicism. However, Ireland's religious freedom remains comparatively good by international standards. This report also notes that there is an increase in the targeting of religious and worshippers in their places of worship by criminals and criminal gangs. Overall, with respect to how the state respects the freedom of conscience of Catholic patronised schools and hospitals indicate into the future, it is likely that the religious freedom of Christians will be constantly checked and challenged in the coming two years.

Sources / Endnotes

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