



Religion

Population

Area

- Christians : **78.3%**
- Agnostics : **14.5%**
- Atheists : **3.7%**
- Muslims : **2.7%**
- Others : **0.8%**

59,801,000

302,073 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The Italian legislation on religious freedom guarantees freedom of religion or belief and recognises it as a fundamental right. Article 3 of the constitution expresses the principle of non-discrimination on religious grounds, stating that “all citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, without distinction of sex, race, language, religion, political opinion, personal and social conditions.”^[1] Article 19 guarantees the individual’s right to profess “their religious belief in any form, individually or with others, and to promote them [sic] and celebrate rites in public or in private, provided they are not offensive to public morality”. Article 8 of the constitution guarantees that “all religious denominations are equally free before the law”.

Italy has no state religion, but Catholicism is the religion of most Italian citizens. Article 7 of the constitution asserts that the Italian state and the Catholic Church are independent and sovereign, and the 1929 Lateran Pacts, amended in 1984, govern their relations. The Government allows the Catholic Church to select teachers to provide religious education in state schools.

Relations between the state and denominations other than Catholicism are regulated by law, based on accords with the respective religious organisations. Before applying to enter into such an accord, the non-Catholic organisation needs to be recognised as having legal personality by the Interior Ministry, in accordance with Law No. 1159/29. The request is then submitted to the Office of the Prime Minister. An accord grants ministers of religion automatic rights of access to state hospitals, prisons, and military barracks; it allows for the civil registration of religious marriages; it facilitates special religious practices regarding funerals; it also exempts students from school attendance on religious holidays. Any religious group without an accord may request these benefits from the Ministry of Interior on a case-by-case basis. An accord also allows a religious group to receive funds collected by the state through the so-called ‘Eight per thousand’, a

compulsory deduction (0.8 percent) from taxpayers annual income tax.

Twelve non-Catholic denominations have an accord with the Italian state and an agreement with the Jehovah's Witnesses has been being negotiated since 1997. There is no agreement with the Islamic community, despite the fact that it represents the largest non-Christian group in Italy and that 32.6 percent of the immigrant population are Muslims^[2] The lack of an agreement results from the lack of a recognised, official Islamic leadership to negotiate agreements with the government. Nonetheless, the Italian Ministry of Home Affairs tried to deal with Islam related issues by creating a Council for Italian Islam in 2005, and elaborating both the 'Charter of Values of Citizenship and Integration,' in 2007, and the 'Declaration of Intent for a Federation of Italian Islam,' in 2008.

In 2016, the 'Council for relationship with Italian Islam' was established under the Ministry of Home Affairs to raise awareness about Islam and deepen dialogue with the Islamic community. Following this, on 1st February 2017, the 'National Pact for an Italian Islam' was signed by the Ministry of Home Affairs and representatives of Italy's main Muslim associations. In the agreed document, among other things, all parties undertake to: "encourage the development and growth of dialogue", "ensure that the places of worship maintain decent standards in compliance with the existing legislation," and "guarantee that Friday sermons are delivered or translated into Italian."^[3]

During the reporting period, the 'Observatory on Religious Minorities in the World and on the Respect for Religious Freedom' was also established under the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and of International Cooperation^[4] The activity of the observatory is part of Italian foreign policy in favour of the protection and promotion of freedom of religion.

Incidents

Catholics have expressed disquiet about anti-ecclesiastical feeling and the promotion of anti Christian values. Catholics are often criticised when they publicly express their opinions on issues of social and ethical concern such as abortion, gay marriage, and euthanasia.

On 14th December 2017 a bill passed into law governing 'living wills'. The legislation allows severely ill people to refuse treatment that would prolong their lives. Many voices within the Church criticised the bill. Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin stated: "One of the deficiencies of this law is that it does not provide for conscientious objection by doctors, health workers and the Catholic institutions."^[5] In response, Health Minister Beatrice Lorenzin said she would guarantee that Catholic doctors might be able to conscientiously object but, at the time of writing, nothing has been done in this regard.

On 5th April 2018, the municipality of Rome ordered the removal of a large anti-abortion poster featuring an 11-week-old foetus in the womb. The poster had been produced by the pro-life association Pro Vita, and had caused many protests from pro-abortion activists, including politicians.^[6]

A few months earlier, the municipality of Rome also removed a poster which portrayed Jesus Christ as a pedophile and the Virgin Mary as pregnant due to surrogacy.^[7]

On 10th March 2018, in the town of Sant'Angelo Lodigiano, a statue of the Virgin Mary was found decapitated^[8] In Castelnuovo Don Bosco, the urn containing St John Bosco's brain was stolen from the Salesian Basilica on the night of 2nd June 2017. The culprit was later arrested.^[9] In March 2018, a statue of the Virgin Mary was stolen from the Park of Martyrs in Rome.^[10]

The Muslim community complained that there was societal discrimination against Muslims, particularly against Muslim women wearing hijabs.^[11] Nadia Bouzekri, the president of the Young Muslims in Italy association, said that she was insulted by an airport employee because she refused to remove her hijab in front of other people.^[12]

A Pew Research Center survey ranked Italy second out of 10 European countries for bias against Muslims, and asserted that 69 percent of people have a negative view of Muslim worshippers.^[13] A report of the European Commission against

Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) also observed persistent anti-Islamic prejudices within the Italian society.^[14]

It is difficult to assess whether the bias is religiously motivated or related to a widespread anti-immigrant feeling, as migrants are perceived as mostly Islamic. Muslim people are also identified with Islamic terrorists and are seen as potentially dangerous. This was also noticed by the Italian Chamber of Deputies' 'Jo Cox Committee on hate, intolerance, xenophobia and racism.'^[15] The committee's final report confirmed high levels of prejudice and misinformation in Italy, with widespread forms of religious intolerance and discrimination. According to the report, 40 percent of Italian people believe that non-Christian migrants represent a threat to Italian society, while 26.9 percent are against allowing the construction of buildings for non-Christian religions and 41.1 percent oppose the construction of mosques.^[16]

A phenomenon Italy will certainly have to deal with in the near future is the risk of radicalisation of Muslim inmates detained in Italian prisons. In its XIV Report on detention conditions in Italy, the Antigone Association for inmates' rights noted that the number of inmates at risk of radicalisation increased by 72 percent in 2017.^[17]

In June 2016 the Jewish Italian community hailed as a success the approval of law n. 115 which makes denial of the Shoah a crime. According to the Observatory on Anti-Semitism, there were about 215 anti-Semitic episodes in Italy in the last two years. Most of these were online anti-Semitic attacks, including the Facebook post of a northern Italian mayor, who insulted Jewish people on International Holocaust Remembrance Day,^[18] and the anti-Semitic posts of a Five Star Movement party senator.^[19]

On October 2017, Lazio soccer team's fans posted stickers of Anne Frank on the jersey of rivals Roma, alongside slogans such as "Roma fans are Jews".^[20] Several cases of vandalism were also reported, such as the destruction of the Holocaust memorial plaque in Arezzo in January 2018^[21] and the theft of two 'Stolpersteins'^[22] in Collegno^[23] and Venice.^[24]

Prospects for freedom of religion

Immigration and EU law forces the Italian government to deal with the growth of non-Christian religious communities and above all Islam which, according to a Pew Research Center study, will consistently grow, reaching 8.3 percent of the population in 2050.^[25] In this regard, the signature of the 'National treaty for an Italian Islam' is a positive step, which makes it clear that the government is in the process of creating the necessary structures to promote and protect the right to freedom of religion.

The risk of inmates' radicalisation is a delicate matter to be addressed, along with anti-Semitic attitudes and the right of Catholics to assert their own opinions in the public sphere.

Endnotes / Sources

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