



## Religion

## Population

## Area

- Christians : **95.8%**
- Baha'is : **3.6%**
- Others : **0.6%**

107,000

747 Km<sup>2</sup>

## Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Tonga is an archipelago in Oceania about two-thirds of the way from Hawaii to New Zealand.

Under the constitution, all persons are “free to practise their religion and to worship God as they may deem fit in accordance with the dictates of their own worship consciences and to assemble for religious service in such places as they may appoint.”<sup>[1]</sup> The constitution also specifies, however, that it is unlawful to use this freedom “to commit evil and licentious acts or, under the name of worship, to do what is contrary to the law and peace of the land”. The constitution provides that “the Sabbath shall be kept holy in Tonga” and that no business transactions are permitted, except those allowed by the law. Any legal agreements made on the Sabbath are void in law.

The country is overwhelmingly Christian. The largest churches are the Free Wesleyan Church (37.3 percent), the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) (16.8 percent), the Free Church of Tonga (11.4 percent), and the Roman Catholic Church (15.6 percent)<sup>[2]</sup>. There are a number of smaller Christian communities including the Church of Tonga (7.2 percent), the Tokaikolo Christian Church (2.6 percent), the Assembly of God (2.3 percent), and the Seventh Day Adventists (2.2 percent). There are also other religions, including Muslims, Hindus and Baha'is.

There is no requirement for religious groups to register with the state. However, registration is needed to conduct legally binding marriages and to obtain other benefits, such as tax exemptions.

Religious communities are permitted to run education centres and are allowed to offer religious education once a week for an hour.<sup>[3]</sup> Students are not required to attend religious courses about a religion other than their own; otherwise such education is compulsory.

The constitutional provisions about religious freedom are generally respected by the government in Tonga. Missionaries

are allowed to enter the country and proselytise. In May 2016, however, Imam Ilyas, a Muslim religious leader, reported concerns that the government had failed to approve the Muslim community's application for registration<sup>[5]</sup>

The state-owned Tonga Broadcasting Commission (TBC) has guidelines which require those who give sermons on Tonga TV and Radio Tonga preach mainstream Christianity. There are no reports of requests to broadcast being denied by the TBC.

## Incidents

On 3rd July 2016, steps were taken to stop bakeries opening on a Sunday to comply with the constitutional provisions about the Sabbath.<sup>[5]</sup> The application of these provisions had been relaxed in the 1980s, following a cyclone, and not enforced since then. Some Tongans publicly expressed their disagreement with the enforcement of the constitution, though their objections seem to arise from business considerations rather than religious principle<sup>[6]</sup> Hotels and restaurants still operate on Sundays to serve tourists. In Tonga, the Seventh Day Adventists observe the Sabbath on Sunday, even though elsewhere they observe it from Friday evening to Saturday evening. Nothing indicates that they believe this adjustment violates their religious freedom. The reason for this is that, although the island is geographically in the Western Hemisphere, it observes eastern time, so when it is still Saturday in the former, it is already Sunday in the latter.<sup>[7]</sup>

In February 2017 a teenage Tongan Islamic convert appeared in an Australian court charged with planning a terrorist attack.<sup>[8]</sup>

## Prospects for freedom of religion

Religious freedom is generally protected by the state. There are no indications that the current situation will change within the foreseeable future.

## Endnotes / Sources

[1] Tonga's Constitution of 1875 with Amendments through 1988, [constituteproject.org](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Tonga_1988.pdf?lang=en), [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Tonga\\_1988.pdf?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Tonga_1988.pdf?lang=en), (accessed 17th February 2018).

[2] 'Tonga', The World Factbook, Central Intelligence Agency, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tn.html>, (accessed 11th March 2018).

[3] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 'Tonga', International Religious Freedom Report for 2016, U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>, (accessed 17th February 2018).

[4] 'Muslim Leader in Tonga Concerned over Delays in Registration Application', Loop, 9th May 2016.

[5] 'Tongan Bakeries Fight Sunday Trading Ban', Premier, 7th July 2016, <https://www.premier.org.uk/News/UK/Tongan-bakeries-fight-Sunday-trading-ban>, (accessed 17th February 2018).

[6] 'Tonga Bakers Protest Against Sunday Sales Ban', BBC, 5th July 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-36703496>, (accessed 17th February 2018).

[7] G. Burnside, 'Why Seventh Day Adventists Keep Sunday in Tonga', Ministry Magazine, January 1966, <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1966/01/why-seventh-day-adventists-keep-sunday-in-tonga>, (accessed 17th February 2018).

[8] 'Alo-Bridget Namoa faces life in prison, 13th February 2017, Matangi Tonga Online,

<http://matangitonga.to/2017/02/13/alo-bridget-namoa-faces-life-prison>, (accessed 11th March 2018).