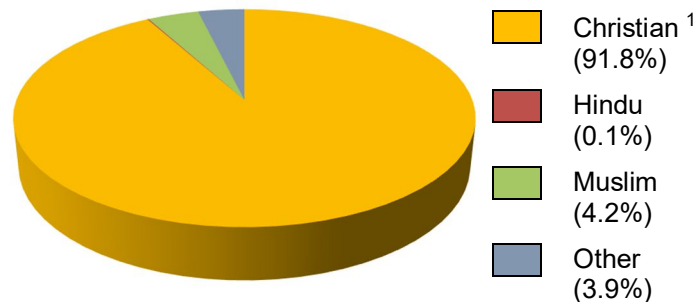


GREECE



Area:	Population:	Political system:	Major Language(s):
131,957 km ²	11.1 million	Democracy	Greek

Legal framework on Freedom of Religion and actual application

The constitution recognises Greek Orthodoxy as the “prevailing religion”. It states that freedom of religious conscience is inviolable and provides for freedom of worship under the protection of the law with some restrictions. Development of religious conscience among citizens is listed as one of the goals of state education.

The constitution states that illegal forms of proselytism, such as blackmail or fraud, are forbidden. The following practices are not considered proselytism by the law and are therefore fully legal: public announcements of one’s religious faith, the natural decision to change a religion or belief through persuasion by arguments or personal conviction, sermons, missionary activities, publication and sale or distribution of printed materials, public and free admission lectures both indoors and outdoors as well as any public reference to religious belief. The practice of faith must not offend public order or morality, for example the use of narcotic substances for religious reasons or mass suicides are forbidden, as they infringe on individual freedoms and dignity. In September 2014 the existing laws concerning hate speech were amended towards a stricter prosecution of such cases.

In the preceding years, the Greek Orthodox Church, the Jewish community, and the Muslim minority of Thrace were the only religious organisations with the status of official religious legal entities under public law. In October 2014, parliament passed legislation that for the first time provides for the establishment of religious legal entities beyond these three groups. It automatically recognised as legal entities the Catholic Church; the Anglican Church; two evangelical Christian groups; and the Ethiopian, Coptic, Armenian, and Assyrian Orthodox Churches. The October 2014 law also provides recognition of Catholic Church canon law.

For groups not automatically granted legal status, the law sets criteria for legal recognition of religious groups, provided the groups meet certain requirements related to the number of members, qualifications of the leadership, and adherence to public order. Once a religious group has legal status, it can legally transfer property and administer houses of prayer and worship, private schools, charitable institutions, and other non-profit entities. The new law also allows religious communities without status as legal entities to appear before administrative and civil courts as plaintiffs or defendants.

In May the Ministries of Education and Religious Affairs, Environment, Energy and Climate Change, Public Order and Citizen Protection, and Health issued a joint ministerial decision regarding the granting of house of prayer permits. The decision required approvals from local urban planning departments to attest to the compliance of a proposed house of prayer with local, public health and safety regulations. Once obtained, planning approvals had to be submitted to the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs together with the documents describing the basic principles and rituals of the religious group, along with a biography of the religious minister or leader. Groups eligible to apply for house of prayer permits had to be classified as known religions without hidden doctrines and with rites of worship open to the public. A separate permit was required for each physical place of worship.

A religious group that had obtained at least one valid permit was considered a “known religion” and acquired protection under the law; this protection was reiterated by the October 1st religious entities law. Religious groups that had never received house of prayer permits and did not receive legal status under the October 1st law, including Scientologists, Hare Krishnas, and polytheistic Hellenic groups, could not function as religious legal entities, and some religious groups functioned as registered non-profit civil law organisations. The government did not legally recognise weddings conducted by those religious groups.

Greek Orthodox religious instruction in primary and secondary schools is included in the school curriculum; students may be exempted upon request, regardless of religious affiliation. The law does not allow non-Greek Orthodox religious instruction in public schools, except for optional Islamic religious instruction in public schools in Thrace for the recognised Muslim minority, and optional Catholic religious instruction in public schools on the islands of Tinos and Syros.

All religious groups, including the Greek Orthodox Church, were subject to taxation on their property owned and used for non-religious purposes. Property used solely for religious purposes remained exempt from taxation per the 2013 change in the law.

The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne gives the recognised Muslim minority of Thrace the right to maintain mosques and social and charitable organisations (awqafs), allows government-appointed muftis to render religious judicial services in the area of family law, and provides for bilingual education for the Muslim minority. The government continued to provide space free of charge to some groups of Muslims whose members requested places of worship during Ramadan and for other religious occasions. Police reportedly closed some informal mosques for operating without permits and in locations which did not meet safety standards for public spaces. Muslim leaders in Athens continued to criticise the absence of a government-funded mosque and the lack of Muslim cemeteries outside of Thrace, stating that this obliged Muslims to travel to Thrace for Islamic burials; additionally, municipal cemetery regulations requiring exhumation of bodies after three years were said to contravene Islamic religious law.²

On 31st July 2014, the parliament approved a law containing technical provisions enabling the creation of crematory facilities. This ruling is opposed by the Greek Orthodox Church, which protests its “unconstitutional character”, as it threatens religious freedom in church facilities which do not wish to offer burials by cremation.³

Incidents

Discrimination and hate speech, including both anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic statements, were directed at members of minority religions and immigrants. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorise many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. Vandalism of cemeteries and memorials and attacks on houses of worship of a variety of religious groups occurred. The known cases were condemned by government officials.

There have been cases of social ostracism because of non-affiliation with Greek Orthodoxy. A small number of metropolitan bishops of the Greek Orthodox Church made anti-Semitic statements

in letters and social media, including encouraging readers to read The Protocols of the Elders of Zion and blaming Jews for widespread killings of Christians in North Africa and the Middle East. At the same time there were many cases of Greek Orthodox clergymen defending the religious freedom of other groups and participating in ecumenical services.

On 27th June 2014, unknown perpetrators vandalised the Holocaust Memorial in Athens with anti-Semitic graffiti containing threats against the Jewish community. On 30th October, the Holocaust Memorial was vandalised again by unknown perpetrators. The government, including the deputy prime minister, publicly denounced the incidents.

In September 2014, unknown individuals shot at a Sikh house of prayer in Marathonas; earlier that same day, unknown individuals broke windows of a different Sikh house of prayer. On 17th October 2014, unknown individuals placed a pig's head and wrote anti-Muslim slogans on the front of the Hellenic-Arab Educational Centre in Athens. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned the incident.⁴

During Easter 2016 the Church of All Saints in the Kallithea district in Athens was set on fire by arsonists of unknown origin. Some witnesses pointed to "Arabic speakers" as the culprits.⁵

In June 2016 a Greek Orthodox Church in Crete was smeared with faeces by attackers claiming to be modern-day adherents of ancient Greek pagan religions. Several other churches on Crete were also vandalised by neo-pagans, for example by smearing anti-Christian messages on icons.⁶

Metropolitan Seraphim of Pireaus has opposed plans for an official mosque in Athens. Supporters of the construction claim that this would be a measure to prevent Islam in Greece going underground and becoming more radical. There were reports of hate speech sermons in unofficial mosques. Such places have also been physically attacked by members of the far-right Golden Dawn party.⁷

In 2014 and 2015 three mosques in Athens received a license, while many more remain unofficial and therefore illegal. While regular preachers rarely pose a problem, there is the danger of guest preachers staying only for a few sermons and spreading extremist positions.⁸

In October 2015 the Jewish cemetery in Athens was vandalised by C-18, a small neo-Nazi group.⁹ Christos Pappas, a member of the Golden Dawn party attacked Israel as the "eternal enemy of Greece and Orthodoxy", evidently linking both. This is an example of the intermingling of ethnic and religious violence by the far right party members. Greek Defence Minister Panos Kammenos criticised these remarks as racist and xenophobic. Minister Kammenos was himself attacked in the past for anti-Semitic comments, but has since then expressed a more positive attitude towards Israel.¹⁰

Prospects for Freedom of Religion

Considering the very difficult political, economic and social situation in Greece, which faces the full brunt of the refugee and financial crisis as well as the existence of an extreme right party, the future for religious freedom in the country looks remarkably positive. The law passed in October 2014, which enabled legal recognition of religious groups beyond the Greek Orthodox Church, the Jewish Community and the Muslim minority of Thrace, was an enormous step towards improvement in religious freedom. Another positive step was a law also passed in 2014, which reinstated Greek citizenship to Jews who lost their citizenship in the era of the Second World War.

The Greek Orthodox Church continues to benefit from government aid. However, unlike in previous years, there were no reports of other faith groups complaining about the amount of financial help and relief being given to the Greek Orthodox.¹¹ The government took a number of steps to promote inter-faith dialogue and religious tolerance.

During a pontifical visit to the island of Lesbos in April 2016, Pope Francis joined with other religious leaders in voicing his support for a humanitarian and ecumenical response to the refugee crisis. It was also agreed that the possibility for the religious communities to remain safely in their homeland remains the principal goal.¹² The Greek Orthodox Church has been engaged in broad humanitarian help for the refugees, by organising soup kitchens for immigrants of all nationalities and religions and by animating believers to reach out to those in need. It also funded a refugee child arriving without parents and a centre for people arriving on the island of Chios. The church-funded charity organisation Apostoli is behind many of such projects.¹³

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- 1 There are no official statistics on religious groups. The number of Roman Catholics is less than 3% of the population.
 - 2 <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2014&dclid=238386#wrapper>
 - 3 <http://www.ekathimerini.com/206522/article/ekathimerini/news/church-vows-to-continue-fight-against-unconstitutional-crematoriums>
 - 4 <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2014&dclid=238386#wrapper>
 - 5 <http://www.frontpagemag.com/fpm/263101/christians-beheaded-and-slaughtered-easter-raymond-ibrahim>
 - 6 http://www.christiantoday.com/article/modern_pagans_are_the_greek_gods_on_their_way_back/87965.htm
 - 7 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-06-11/muslims-forced-to-worship-in-underground-mosque-in-athens/7501488>
 - 8 <http://greece.greekreporter.com/2015/11/23/three-legal-mosques-operating-in-athens-many-more-illegally/>
 - 9 <http://greece.greekreporter.com/2015/10/22/athens-jewish-cemetery-vandalized-by-neo-nazi-group/>
 - 10 <http://www.haaretz.com/jewish/news/1.722675>
 - 11 <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/crisis-prompts-greek-government-to-push-austerity-on-orthodox-church-a-858905.html>
 - 12 <http://www.france24.com/en/20160416-catholic-orthodox-unite-migrants-refugee-crisis-greece-pope>
 - 13 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/15/love-has-no-religion-priests-and-pastors-reach-out-to-refugees>