



## Religion

## Population

## Area

- Christians : **90.4%**
- Muslims : **4.9%**
- Agnostics : **4.0%**
- Others : **0.7%**

10,919,000

131,957 Km<sup>2</sup>

## Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Article 3 of the constitution declares that “the prevailing religion in Greece is that of the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ”.<sup>[1]</sup> Freedom of religion and conscience are guaranteed by article 13, which states that “all known religions shall be free and their rites of worship shall be performed unhindered and under the protection of law”. This article also prohibits proselytism and offences of public order through rites of worship. It is further specified that the ministers of all known religions have the same obligations as those of the Greek Orthodox Church (GOC) and are likewise subject to the same state supervision.<sup>[2]</sup>

Article 16 is fundamental for an understanding of the state's role in religious education. It defines education and the development of national and religious consciousness as a basic mission of the state.<sup>[3]</sup>

In 2014 the government issued a law regulating religious matters, the Law on Organisation of the Legal Form of Religious Communities and Their Organisations. Article 16 of the law states that the GOC, as well as the Jewish and Muslim communities, have traditionally been recognised as official religious legal entities. Other religious communities such as the Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Ethiopian Orthodox, Copts, Armenian Orthodox, Assyrian Orthodox as well as two Evangelical groups received official recognition as legal entities through article 13. With such recognition, a religious group becomes a “known religion”, as specified in article 17. This allows each to legally transfer property as well as to operate houses of worship, monastic institutions and generally meeting houses for religious purposes. Article 3 describes the process of registration. The group needs to prove that it has no clandestine doctrines and functions openly<sup>[4]</sup>

In April 2017, Greek polytheism or Hellenic Religion was granted legal recognition as a “known religion” by the Greek Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs.<sup>[5]</sup>

According to the US International Religious Freedom Report 2016, the GOC received from the government funding and support not available to other religious groups. This included the payment of salaries, religious training for the clergy and funding for religious instruction in schools. The GOC maintains an institutionalised link to the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. Similar benefits are enjoyed in part and to a lesser extent by the Muslim, Catholic and Jewish minorities. The three official Muftiates as well as some imams of the Thrace Muslim community receive their salary through the government. It also funded Catholic religious training and teachers' salaries in state schools on the islands of Syros and Tinos, as well as Holocaust awareness programs for students and teachers.<sup>[6]</sup>

Muslim communities not recognised as part of the minority created by the Treaty of Lausanne do not enjoy benefits such as the right to bilingual education, special quotas for university entry and jobs in the public sector. They cannot use Shari'a law in family matters or have optional Islamic religious classes in public schools.

One ongoing issue between the government and the Thrace Muslim community is the practice of appointing Muftis by the government, instead of the possibility of direct elections. The government defends this as appropriate because the Muftis have judicial powers. Muslims furthermore criticised the lack of Islamic cemeteries outside Thrace, as well as the delay in the construction of an official house of prayer in Athens.<sup>[7]</sup> The construction was approved in 2014 and the mosque was supposed to be opened by April 2017, yet it remains unfinished.<sup>[8]</sup>

In November 2017, two muftis were sentenced to seven months in prison by a court in Thessaloniki for disturbing a religious ceremony and usurping authority. The two muftis, Ahmet Mete and Erkan Azizo?lu, were convicted over an incident at a funeral ceremony for a member of the Muslim Turkish Minority. The court ruled that they usurped the authority to lead the prayer service from the state-appointed mufti of the city of Xanthi in northern Greece. Following the court ruling, the prison sentences were suspended.<sup>[9]</sup>

In January 2018 the government introduced new legislation allowing members of the Thrace Muslim community to opt for secular courts in cases concerning divorce, child custody and inheritance matters instead of the Islamic courts. While the laws governing Shari'a are not fully abolished, the Muslim minority in Thrace is now presented with alternative choices.<sup>[10]</sup>

At the beginning of March 2018, 2,000 protesters gathered before parliament to voice their disapproval of new schoolbooks, which were less partial to the GOC and presented other religious groups more neutrally. According to World Religion News, some signs carried by demonstrators bore inscriptions against the authors of the textbooks, describing them as traitors to Greece. Others wrote: "No to ecumenical religion." The protesters delivered their petition to parliament and disbanded peacefully.<sup>[11]</sup> Later that month (March), the Greek Council declared the changes made by former education minister Nikos Filis as unconstitutional. They allegedly violated article 16 of the constitution.<sup>[12]</sup>

## Incidents

It is at times difficult to separate hate crimes based on ethnicity from those based on religion. According to a report by Aljazeera, the number of attacks on immigrants has increased over the last few years. It noted however that the far right Golden Dawn, which has been previously at the forefront of racially or religiously motivated violence, scaled down its attacks. The author of the article links this decline to the ongoing court trials of some members of the organisation, who were arrested in previous years.<sup>[13]</sup>

According to an article in the National Catholic Reporter, the relationship between the Orthodox and Catholic communities is often better on the islands than on the mainland and in the big cities. The article also points out the economic hardship of Catholic parishes, which do not receive the same state support as the GOC and which have been hit hard by tax rises in recent years.<sup>[14]</sup>

A step forward for religious freedom came when Pope Francis paid a short visit to the island of Lesbos in April 2016. The atmosphere was calm as compared with the hostility Pope Saint John Paul II encountered during his visit in 2001. Pope

Francis has been invited by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to come together in a display of Christian unity on the refugee question.<sup>[15]</sup>

## Prospects for freedom of religion

In the long term, the situation has improved as compared with several years ago, but the changes have occurred only slowly. It has to be noted, however, that the general trend is in the right direction. There are efforts to improve the level of religious freedom in the country. Then again, the ongoing refugee crisis which hit Greece especially hard, poses a great challenge. Acts of intolerance against Muslims are on the rise, but the relevant authorities remain ready to impose the law.

## Endnotes / Sources

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[3] Ibid.

[4] Law on Organisation of the Legal Form of Religious Communities and Their Organisations from 2014 [www.legislationline.org/download/action/download/id/5782/file/Greece\\_law\\_Organization\\_legal\\_form\\_religious\\_communities\\_orgs](http://www.legislationline.org/download/action/download/id/5782/file/Greece_law_Organization_legal_form_religious_communities_orgs) (accessed 27th April 2018).

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<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/01/greek-neo-nazi-group-threatens-muslim-association-180119103914680.html> (accessed 27th April 2018).

[14] <https://www.ncronline.org/news/world/greeces-beleaguered-catholics-long-crisis-continues> (accessed 27th April 2018).

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