



Religion

Population

Area

- Christians : **87.6%**
- Agnostics : **7.9%**
- Muslims : **2.6%**
- Atheists : **1.5%**
- Others : **0.4%**

46.065.000

505.944 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Article 16 of the constitution of 1978^[1] protects religious freedom. Relations between the Spanish state and the Catholic Church are regulated by the agreement of 28th July 1976 and the agreements of 3rd January 1979 on legal, economic, educational and cultural matters, as well as religious assistance in the Armed Forces and the military service of members of the clergy.^[2]

In addition to the Catholic Church, the Spanish state has regulated its relations with other faiths by enacting the following legislative acts: Law 24/1992 approving the Cooperation Agreement between the state and the Federation of Evangelical Religious Entities of Spain,^[3] Law 25/1992 on the Cooperation Agreement between the state and the Federation of Jewish Communities of Spain,^[4] and Law 26/1992, the Cooperation Agreement between the state and the Islamic Commission of Spain.^[5]

Religious freedom in Spain is also regulated by the Organic Law 7/1980 on Religious Freedom,^[6] as well as Organic Laws 1/2002 on the Right of Association,^[7] 2/2006 on Education,^[8] 10/1995 on the Penal Code,^[9] 8/2013 on the Improvement of Educational Quality,^[10] and 6/2001 on the Universities.^[11]

Incidents

The Catholic Church is Spain's majority religion with 32,556,922 members and 22,999 parishes^[12] Although it has the largest number of followers, it is also the one that has experienced the most incidents, ranging from insults in the media to attacks on individuals and places of worship.

Media reports have highlighted incidents of anti-Christian graffiti in universities. The graffiti clearly indicated intent to incite hatred and intimidate Catholics. There were repeated incidents of graffiti at the church at the King Juan Carlos University (Universidad Rey Juan Carlos de Madrid (URJC)), a public university in Madrid. Sprayed statements included “Church outside URJC”, “Masses out, no more crucifixes” and “Goodbye Mass URJC”.[13] Spain’s Observatory of Freedom of Religion and Conscience 2017 report noted the escalation of “a left-wing anti-Christian secular intolerance”. One case involved unidentified attackers who threw an incendiary device inside the chapel of the Autonomous University of Madrid, another public university. The report states that they “threw Molotov cocktails, destroyed one of its religious statues... [and] the church was sprayed with a message stating that ‘the only Church that illuminates is one that is burning’.”[14] This same chapel was vandalised in June 2016.[15] This same chapel was vandalised in June 2016.[16]

Increasingly, consecrated men and women of the Catholic Church are the target of physical and verbal attacks. One such case involved an attack on a nun in Granada,[17] a Sister of the Congregation of the Slaves of the Immaculate Child. A stranger attacked her without warning and punched her, shouting: “For a nun”. The Sister’s nose was broken in the attack. The attacker was identified and the police passed the information to the appropriate legal authority![18]

The Catholic Church has reported a significant rise in the number of desecrations of the Eucharist, especially the theft of the consecrated host in several parts of the country, including Segovia, Valencia, Parla (Madrid), Alcalá de Henares (Madrid) and Castellón. The desecration of the Blessed Sacrament in the parish of San Alfonso Rodríguez in El Sotillo (Segovia) prompted widespread media coverage. A window and several doors were forced open and a pyx – a small receptacle used for taking Holy Communion to the sick – was stolen from the tabernacle.[19] The local Civil Guard (police) launched an investigation after finding the pyx.[20]

In 2017 there was a rise in insults and attacks against the Catholic faith, especially in the fields of art, culture and the media. This continued into 2018, with a carnival-time parody of the Last Supper. The performance of a “drag queen” ridiculed the Catholic religion at the carnivals of Las Palmas de Gran Canarias, which was seen around the world[21] The incident did not elicit much reaction, except for a statement by the Secretary General of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Spain and the Bishop of Las Palmas.

During the period under review, the number of burglaries and attacks against Catholic places of worship increased across the country with the theft of images, crucifixes, tabernacles, bells, money and religious objects. In the Diocese of Astorga (León) there were some 60 burglaries at churches over a 15-month period.[22] The Civil Guard arrested two people in connection with more than 40 church burglaries.[23] However, no direct link could be established between these incidents and religious freedom.

In 2017, various leftist political groups called on local and regional institutions to repeal agreements signed with the Holy See. With the support of the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party, the Podemos Party and the Republican Left of Catalonia, the lower house of the Spanish Parliament approved a request to the government to suspend the agreements with the Vatican.[24] In the Congress of Deputies, these parties also presented various non-legislative proposals demanding the elimination of religion from the school curriculum,[25] as well as doing away with the fixed tax collected from personal income tax in favour of the Catholic Church [26] and the Sunday broadcast of Holy Mass on state television.[27] A socialist was elected Prime Minister of Spain in June 2018.

With respect to other religions, of particular note was the Citizen Platform Against Islamophobia’s (PCI) Annual Report in Spain 2017, which recorded 573 incidents against Islam in 2016, mainly in Catalonia, Andalusia and the Valencian Community.[28] Media reports add that: “In total, the PCI followed up on 573 cases, more than double the previous year, half of them occurring on the internet and social media.”[29]

The PCI report highlights that attacks on mosques – in most cases by extreme right groups – were particularly numerous in the days following Islamist attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils in August 2017 (see paragraph below). Similarly, it mentioned attacks on 14 businesses or establishments connected to Muslims, within a few days. However, it also noted as a positive development the growing differentiation made between Islam and terrorist groups that carry out attacks.

Daesh (ISIS) claimed responsibility^[30] when a militant Islamist drove a van at high speed killing 15 people and injuring more than 120 others in Las Ramblas, Barcelona in August 2017. The day before this attack, a house in Alcanar, Tarragona, was destroyed in an explosion^[31], according to police, the intended target was the Sagrada Familia Basilica in Barcelona. The day after the Las Ramblas massacre, police killed five suspected terrorists who rammed a police car. One of the attackers also stabbed a woman. Spanish authorities linked these events to a terrorist cell of 12 members, led by a militant Imam. After the attacks, thousands of marchers including many Muslims went down Las Ramblas with banners stating “Muslims against terrorism” and “we are Muslims, not terrorists”^[32]

Prospects for freedom of religion

One of the most important events connected to religious freedom in the country last year was the first Spanish publication of a joint communiqué by various religious confessions in the face of attacks against religious groups. It was signed by the Federation of Jewish Communities of Spain, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Spain, the Islamic Commission of Spain and the Federation of Evangelical Religious Entities of Spain. It was presented to the public on 20th February 2018.^[33]

It expressed “concern and sadness for the constant and repeated offences against the religious feelings of the faithful of different confessions. Faced with this situation, there was a request for mutual respect for both believers and non-believers.”^[34] The representatives of Spain’s main religions drafted the joint statement demanding respect.

The statement read: “In our country, there is still incomprehensible social tolerance for offending religious feelings. In Spain, places of worship and religious symbols are desecrated; the most sacred references of the religious faith of millions of people are publicly mocked and scorned with impunity.” In the statement, Muslims, Jews and Christians recorded that they “find it unacceptable that [the offenders] seek to protect themselves by invoking freedom of expression”.

Against this background, Spain’s religious groups note their commitment to continue working together with the rest of Spanish society for peace, integration and coexistence in freedom and for the common good. Although religious freedom is guaranteed in the country, there is concern about the rising number of incidents of anti-Christian intolerance carried out by secular groups.

Endnotes / Sources

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