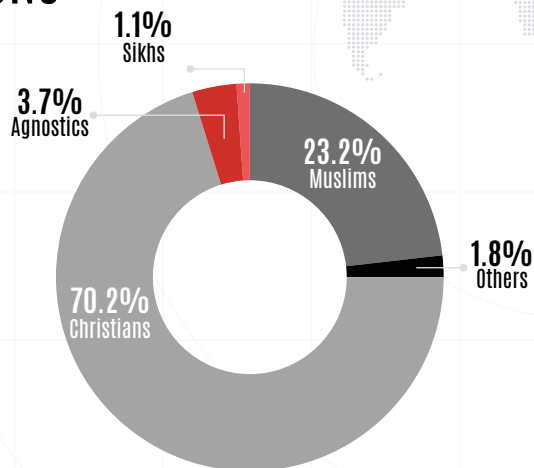




# CYPRUS

## RELIGIONS



## LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

Article 18 of the constitution of the Republic of Cyprus guarantees freedom of religion.<sup>1</sup> Religious discrimination is prohibited which also safeguards the right of individuals to profess their faith, worship, teach, practice or observe their religion, whether individually or collectively, in private or in public. Such rights can only be limited on grounds of national security, constitutional order, public health, safety, morals, or the protection of civil rights and liberties. The same article of the constitution specifies that all religions are free and equal before the law, so long as their doctrines or rites are not kept secret. Furthermore, it safeguards an individual's right to change his or her religion and prohibits the use of any type of coercion to make a person change, or prevent a person from changing, his or her religion.

Article 110 of the constitution grants the Autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus and the Vakf, an Islamic institution, exclusive rights regarding their internal affairs and properties. It also prohibits legislative, executive, or other acts which contravene or interfere with the Orthodox Church or the Vakf.<sup>2</sup>

These institutions alongside the other constitutionally recognized denominations (Maronite Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, and Roman Catholics) are exempted from taxes and all receive subsidies and financial assistance from the state.

Religious groups not recognized in the constitution can register as non-profit organizations and they are eligible to apply for tax exemptions. However, this status does not entitle them to receive any financial support from government institutions.<sup>3</sup>

Military service in the Republic of Cyprus is mandatory. Conscientious objectors on religious grounds can be granted exemption from active military duty or reservist service in the National Guard but must complete alternative service.<sup>4</sup>

Article 19 of the constitution guarantees that every person has the freedom of speech and expression in any form. However, according to the art. 141-142 Cypriot Criminal Code, deliberately offending any person's religious feelings is a criminal offence. Additionally, publishing books, pamphlets, letters or articles in magazines and newspapers with the intent of humiliating a religion, or insulting those who follow it, is considered a

misdemeanor and is punishable by law.<sup>5</sup>

## INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

An essential aspect of the complicated ethnic and religious landscape of Cyprus is the fact that, since 1974, Cyprus remains divided with the southern part of the island controlled by the Government of the Republic of Cyprus, and the northern part administered by Turkish Cypriots, who proclaimed the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus”.

The division resulted in the Greek Cypriots (mostly Orthodox Christians) fleeing south and the Muslim Turkish Cypriots taking refuge in the north. This division also cut through religious communities on both sides, and barred access to important religious sites, including the Hala Sultan Tekke mosque in the south and the Saint Barnabas monastery in the north.

In 2019 some incidents, which resulted in obstruction of access to the mosques, were reported. According to Imam Shakir Alemdar, Representative of the Mufti of Cyprus, the Department of Antiquities closed the Limassol Great Mosque for restoration without informing the Muslim community about the schedule and nature of the restoration. He also complained that the security guards of the Department of Antiquities in charge of the Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque, refused to let some non-Muslim tourists attend Friday prayers, despite them being invited by the Imam. In all cases communication with authorities was to blame.<sup>6</sup> Although Imam Alemdar criticized the fact that Hala Sultan Tekke is managed by the Department of Antiquities, which he considered an infringement of religious freedom guaranteed by the EU, he also underlined that Cyprus can be an example of mutual religious respect stating: “This is a great advantage for an EU member country, Cyprus has this insight about Islam”.<sup>7</sup>

The will of interfaith solidarity was confirmed in a statement by the Religious Leaders of Cyprus condemning the attack on the Köprülü Mosque in Limassol on 1st June 2020, which was vandalized with a petrol bomb and racist graffiti against Islam and immigrants. The religious leaders stated: “We stand up against all actions that try to damage the multicultural character of Cyprus we all strive to maintain”.<sup>8</sup>

Since 2019, when Turkey sent drilling ships to the coast of Cyprus to explore natural gas, tensions between Cyprus, the European Union, and Ankara have been escalating. In October 2020 the openly pro-Turkish Cypriot politician Ersin Tatar was elected leader of the Turkish Cypriots. Many Turkish Cypriots are concerned that rising religious conservatism promoted by the current Turkish leadership will erode their way of life by building mosques and encouraging Islamic religious education.<sup>9</sup>

Northern Cyprus was featured in a UK Report on the persecution of Christians around the world, commissioned by the Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt. The document produced by the Bishop of Truro, Philip Mounstephen, and published in May 2019, noted that access for worship to the historic Orthodox and Maronite churches in the area was severely restricted. The report stressed that there are very few churches allowed to hold regular Sunday services, signaled intrusive police surveillance, and the fact that sometimes services were interrupted without warning and the congregation was evicted. Many historic churches and cemeteries in the area had also been allowed to fall into disrepair, to be vandalised or converted to other uses.<sup>10</sup>

Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, restrictions were imposed on the territory of the Republic of Cyprus during 2020, affecting manifestations of religion and worship. It also prevented both Christian and Muslim worshippers to cross “The Green Line” separating the two parts of the island to visit their temples and religious sites. Following these restrictions, and as a gesture of goodwill and respect, in June 2020 several Turkish Cypriot Muslims prayed at the Tomb of Apostle Barnabas, Patron of Cyprus, as Christians were unable to visit the Monastery in Northern Cyprus as usual.<sup>11</sup>

Strict regulations were implemented during Easter and Christmas celebrations. Church services and other forms of religious worship in religious sites were allowed only without public attendance and were transmitted by internet. Religious ceremonies: weddings, christenings, funerals, were permitted with a maximum of 10 persons attending.<sup>12</sup> Some clergymen, however, did not fully comply with the law. The most significant violation took place in a church in Peristerona, where the Orthodox Bishop of Morphou, Metropolitan Neophytos of the Church of Cyprus, held a Mass to celebrate Palm Sunday with the participation of members of the

public. Police decided to investigate the case.<sup>13</sup> Bishop Neophytos also refused to prohibit worshippers from attending services after the government re-imposed stricter limitation rules on the number of worshippers in December 2020.

Archbishop Chrysostomos II of Cyprus tried to obtain permission to ease restrictions on faithful for Christmas celebrations, but President Nicos Anastasiades declined leaving the measures on Covid-19 in place.<sup>14</sup>

## PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Religious and ethnic factors present in the Cypriot conflict have paved the way for external actors to take an active part in it promoting their political and economic agendas. A major economic issue stalling any progress in resolving the Cyprus conflict is the recent discovery of rich gas fields in a highly conflicted maritime site which involves the Cyprus, Greece, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Egypt governments, as well as the interests of numerous western energy companies.<sup>15</sup>

In the period under review, there is an increasingly confrontational environment in the region triggered by a more active approach in Turkey's foreign policy toward the Turkish Cypriots, which includes a religious element.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the political situation, religious representatives continue to unite in reconciliation and peace initiatives. In June 2020, religious leaders of Cyprus gathered under the auspices of the Embassy of Sweden to celebrate the 10th Anniversary of the Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process (RTCYPP). During the meeting with the Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs, they expressed commitment to cooperation and protection of religious freedom in Cyprus.<sup>17</sup>

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