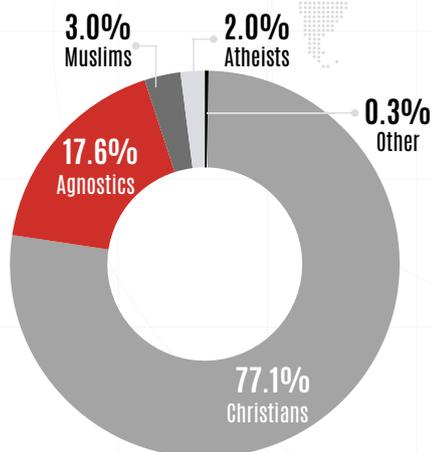




# FINLAND

## RELIGIONS



## LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

The Constitution of Finland guarantees freedom of religion and conscience, which includes the right to profess and practise a religion, to express one's beliefs and to belong, or not, to a religious community (Chapter 2, 11).<sup>1</sup> Everyone is equal before the law and discrimination based on religion is prohibited (Chapter 2, 6). Discrimination complaints can be made to the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman.<sup>2</sup>

The Criminal Code of Finland prohibits any "breach of the sanctity of religion," including public blasphemy or insulting what is held sacred by a religious community, and disturbing, interfering with, or preventing religious practices (Chapter 17, 10 and 11).<sup>3</sup>

The Criminal Code of Finland (Chapter 11, 10), conventionally called the "ethnic agitation" law, prohibits expressing opinions that threaten, insult or defame a certain group on the basis of certain characteristics, such as religion, belief, and sexual orientation.<sup>4</sup>

The Act on the Freedom of Religion<sup>5</sup> applies to the Evan-

gelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELC), the Orthodox Church of Finland (OCF), and registered religious communities (Chapter 1, 2), such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Evangelical Free Church of Finland, and the Catholic Church.<sup>6</sup>

Religion can be practised without registration, but the latter is required to be eligible for government funds.<sup>7</sup> To register, a community must have at least twenty members, a religious purpose, and written by-laws (Chapter 2, 8 and 9).<sup>8</sup>

Members of the ELC or the OCF are obligated to pay a church tax, while other religious communities are not permitted to tax their members.<sup>9</sup> The ELC receives state funding to carry out its statutory duties, and the OCF and other registered religious communities receive government grants.<sup>10</sup>

In 2017, Finland's only Catholic diocese was ordered to hire its former volunteer priests as workers in order to pay taxes and employee benefits. Raimo Goyarolla, the administrator of the Helsinki diocese, said this policy change left the diocese as "one of the poorest in Europe". "We had to demolish the diocesan centre for retreats and summer camps, and many experts advise us to shut down three of the eight parishes."<sup>11</sup>

The religious affiliation of children under 12 years is decided jointly by the parents or legal guardians; the religious affiliation of children between 12 and 15 years may only be changed with the consent of both the child and the parents or legal guardians.<sup>12</sup>

Religious education is mandatory and students are given religious instruction in accordance with their registered religions, while others can choose between religious education or secular ethics.<sup>13</sup>

The Animal Welfare Act allows some religious slaughter to stun and bleed animals simultaneously.<sup>14</sup>

Conscientious objection to military service on religious grounds is permitted, provided that objectors complete alternative civilian service. Failure to serve can result in imprisonment.

In February 2019, Finnish lawmakers ended the blanket exemption from both military and civilian service for Jehovah's Witnesses after a 2018 court ruling deemed the practice discriminatory to other objectors.<sup>15</sup>

## INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

According to the 2018 Hate Crime Reporting database, there were 65 crimes motivated by anti-Christian bias (31 physical assaults, 29 threats/threatening behaviour, three incidents of damage to property, and two attacks on places of worship).<sup>16</sup> A total of 46 crimes were reported the year before.<sup>17</sup>

A church in eastern Finland was burned to the ground by an arsonist in September 2018.<sup>18</sup> Arson was suspected in a July 2019 fire on church property in Hyvinkää.<sup>19</sup>

A Christian Finnish parliamentarian was the subject of a criminal investigation and was questioned by police under Chapter 11, Section 10 of the Criminal Code of Finland,<sup>20</sup> the so-called "ethnic agitation law", for authoring a church pamphlet in 2004 and speaking publicly in 2019 and 2020 about her Christian perspective on the biblical view of human sexuality. Her remarks were deemed an insult to homosexuals.<sup>21</sup>

Official figures from the Hate Crime Reporting database for 2018 indicate 21 crimes motivated by anti-Semitism (2 physical assaults, 15 incitements to violence/threats/threatening behaviour, and 4 cases of vandalism/damage to property).<sup>22</sup> In 2017, Finland reported 9 anti-Semitic crimes.<sup>23</sup>

There was reportedly a spike in anti-Semitic attacks in Finland in 2019. In November 2019, anti-Semitic stickers were "plastered across the city" of Helsinki on the anniversary of Kristallnacht<sup>24</sup>, also known as the Night of Broken Glass, when an anti-Jewish pogrom was carried out across Nazi Germany on 9–10 November 1938. Ostensibly, the stickers were part of a coordinated plan by Nordic neo-Nazi groups. Politicians and community leaders held a rally in solidarity with the Jewish community.<sup>25</sup>

In February 2020, President Sauli Niinistö condemned rising anti-Semitism and racism in the country, citing two incidents (vandalism of the Turku synagogue and the burning of an Israeli flag by a neo-Nazi group) on International Holocaust Remembrance Day.<sup>26</sup>

According to the 2018 Hate Crime Reporting database, 50 crimes were motivated by anti-Muslim bias, including hate crime "committed between Shia and Sunni Muslims" (20 physical assaults, 19 incitements to violence/threats/threatening behaviour, 8 incidents of damage to property, and 3 disturbances of the peace).<sup>27</sup> This figure was significantly lower than the 137 crimes reported in 2017.<sup>28</sup>

In December 2018, a 10-year-old Muslim girl was reportedly attacked by classmates for wearing a hijab at school.<sup>29</sup>

After the 15th March 2019 attacks on mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, the Helsinki mosque was vandalised with anti-Muslim graffiti.<sup>30</sup> A smoke bomb was thrown through a window of the Oulu mosque of the Islamic Society of Northern Finland in February 2019, "the ninth time that mosque had been vandalised within one year," the mosque's imam said.<sup>31</sup> Other incidents included vandalism against property and destruction of frozen halal meat.<sup>32</sup>

A Russian-speaking man from Latvia was arrested in October 2018 on charges of plotting to detonate homemade bombs during 2018 New Year's Eve celebrations in Helsinki. The prosecution said that his planned targets included "foreigners and Muslims".<sup>33</sup>

According to the U.S. Office of International Religious Freedom, "NGOs working with migrants, including the Finnish Refugee Advice Centre and Amnesty, continued to raise concerns about the ability of religious minorities housed in migrant reception centers to worship without harassment by other migrants held within the same center."<sup>34</sup>

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Finland imposed tight restrictions on religious activities,<sup>35</sup> suspending public celebrations but allowing for private prayer in places of

worship.<sup>36</sup> This affected Ramadan (24 April-23 May), Easter (5-12 April), and Passover (8-16 April). Finland's approach was described as "high" (compared to "very high," "moderate," or "low").<sup>37</sup> Due to massive layoffs related to the virus, it is estimated the ELC could see a five per cent decrease in church tax revenue, amounting to a decrease of around 44 million euros (US\$ 51 million).<sup>38</sup>

In January 2020, Pope Francis received an ecumenical delegation from Finland,<sup>39</sup> including Helsinki's Lutheran bishop and members of the country's Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, as part of an annual tradition to celebrate Saint Henrik, Finland's patron saint.<sup>40</sup>

## PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

It appears that there were no significant new or increased governmental restrictions on religious freedom during the period under review, but freedom of expression could be at risk through the use of the "ethnic agitation" law. The rise in anti-Semitic hate crimes is of concern, but political leaders are addressing the issue by holding perpetrators accountable under the law.

## SOURCES / ENDNOTES

- 1 The Constitution of Finland, Ministry of Justice, <https://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/1999/en19990731> (accessed 11th October 2020).
- 2 Office of the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman, Customer Service, Ministry of Justice (Finland), <https://www.syrjinta.fi/web/en/customer-service> (accessed 12th March 2020).
- 3 Criminal Code of Finland, Finlex, <https://finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/1889/en18890039> (accessed 1st September 2020).
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Act on the Freedom of Religion, Finlex, <https://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/2003/en20030453?search%5Btype%5D=pika&search%5Bkieli%5D%5B0%5D=en&search%5Bpika%5D=freedom%20or%20religion> (accessed 11th October 2020).
- 6 "Religious Communities," Religious Affairs, Ministry of Education and Culture (Finland), <https://minedu.fi/en/religious-communities> (accessed 16th March 2020).
- 7 Office of International Religious Freedom, "Finland," 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom, U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/finland/> (accessed 16th March 2020).
- 8 Act on the Freedom of Religion, op. cit.
- 9 "Financing: religious affairs," Ministry of Education and Culture, <https://minedu.fi/en/financing-religious-affairs> (accessed 2nd September 2020).
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ray Cavanaugh, "In Europe's least Catholic nation, the Church grows amid financial hardship," Catholic World Report, 18th January 2020, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2020/01/18/in-europes-least-catholic-nation-the-church-grows-amid-financial-hardship/> (accessed 15th March 2020).
- 12 Act on the Freedom of Religion, op. cit.
- 13 "Religious Education in Finland," Suomen uskonnonopettajain liitto ry (Finnish Association of Religious Teachers), <https://www.suol.fi/index.php/religious-education-in-finland> (accessed 2nd September 2020).
- 14 Animal Welfare Act, Finlex, <https://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/1996/en19960247?search%5Btype%5D=pika&search%5Bkieli%5D%5B0%5D=en&search%5Bpika%5D=animal> (accessed 11th October 2020).
- 15 "Finland sees rise in 'total objectors' to military, civilian service," Yle, 5th May 2019, [https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/finland\\_sees\\_rise\\_in\\_total\\_objectors\\_to\\_military\\_civilian\\_service/10768160](https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/finland_sees_rise_in_total_objectors_to_military_civilian_service/10768160) (accessed 17th March 2020).
- 16 Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, "2018 Hate Crime Reporting – Finland," Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, <https://hatecrime.osce.org/finland?year=2018>, (accessed 18th March 2020).
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 "29-year-old placed under arrest for Joensuu church fire," Yle, 27th September 2018, [https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/29-year-old\\_placed\\_under\\_arrest\\_for\\_joensuu\\_church\\_fire/10427004](https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/29-year-old_placed_under_arrest_for_joensuu_church_fire/10427004) (accessed 15th March 2020).
- 19 "Police suspect arson in Hyvinkää church incident," Daily Finland, 19th July 2019, <http://www.dailyfinland.fi/national/11635/Police-suspect-arson-in-church-fire> (accessed 20th March 2020).
- 20 The Criminal Code of Finland, op. cit.
- 21 "Finnish Christian MP interrogated again about her views on homosexuality", Evangelical Focus, 28th August 2020, <https://evangelicalfocus.com/europe/7738/finnish-christian-mp-interrogated-again-about-her-views-on-homosexuality-and-bible> (accessed 3rd September 2020).
- 22 Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, op. cit.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 "Politicians and community leaders show solidarity with Finland's Jewish community after anti-Semitic incidents" Helsinki Times, 19th November 2019, <https://www.helsinkitimes.fi/finland/news-in-brief/16996-in-pictures-politicians-and-community-leaders-show-solidarity-with-fin>

land-s-jewish-community-after-anti-semitic-incidents.html (accessed 15th March 2020).

25 Ibid.

26 Elena Pavlovska, "Finland's president warns of rising anti-Semitism, racism in country," *New Europe*, 7th February 2020, <https://www.neweurope.eu/article/finlands-president-warns-of-rising-anti-semitism-racism-in-country/> (accessed 18th March 2020).

27 Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, op. cit.

28 Ibid.

29 Ali Rashid and Enrique Tessieri, "10-year-old Muslim girl of Espoo: The police say one thing while others say another," *Migrant Tales*, 20th December 2018, <http://www.migranttales.net/10-year-old-muslim-girl-of-espoo-the-police-say-one-thing-while-others-say-another/> (accessed 11th October 2020).

30 "Hate graffiti on the walls of Helsinki mosque distresses Finnish Muslims after NZ massacre," *Helsinki Times*, 16th March 2019, <https://www.helsinkitimes.fi/finland/finland-news/domestic/16265-hate-graffiti-on-the-walls-of-helsinki-mosque-distresses-finnish-muslims-after-nz-massacre.html> (accessed 18th March 2020).

31 "Vandals hurl smoke bomb at window of Oulu mosque," *Yle*, 26th February 2019, [https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/vandals\\_hurl\\_smoke\\_bomb\\_at\\_window\\_of\\_oulu\\_mosque/10663222](https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/vandals_hurl_smoke_bomb_at_window_of_oulu_mosque/10663222) (accessed 18th March 2020).

32 Ibid.

33 "Man on trial for planned 2018 bomb attack targeting 'foreigners and Muslims'," *Yle*, 16th January 2020, [https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/man\\_on\\_trial\\_for\\_planned\\_2018\\_bomb\\_attack\\_targeting\\_foreigners\\_and\\_muslims/11160346](https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/man_on_trial_for_planned_2018_bomb_attack_targeting_foreigners_and_muslims/11160346) (accessed 28th August 2020); "Latvian neo-Nazi on trial in Finland for alleged New Year bomb plot," *LSM.LV*, 17th January 2019, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/crime/latvian-neo-nazi-on-trial-in-finland-for-alleged-new-year-bomb-plot.a345120/> (accessed 11th October 2020).

34 Office of International Religious Freedom," op. cit.

35 Paco Santamaria, "Coronavirus: how new restrictions on religious liberty vary across Europe," *The Conversation*, 9th April 2020, <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-how-new-restrictions-on-religious-liberty-vary-across-europe-135879> (accessed 11th October 2020).

36 "Ramadan to be observed in homes due to coronavirus," *Yle*, 17th April 2020, [https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/ramadan\\_to\\_be\\_observed\\_in\\_homes\\_due\\_to\\_coronavirus/11310675](https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/ramadan_to_be_observed_in_homes_due_to_coronavirus/11310675) (accessed 28th August 2020); Pasi Punkari, "Kirkot avautuvat jälleen seurakuntalaisille – myös kirkoissa noudatetaan turvallisuusohjeita," *Yle*, 5th June 2020, <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-11384633> (accessed 1st September 2020).

37 Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, "OSCE Human Dimension Commitments and State Responses to the Covid-19 Pandemic," *Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe*, p. 117, [https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/c/457567\\_0.pdf](https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/c/457567_0.pdf) (accessed 4th September 2020); Alexis Artaud de La Ferrière, "Coronavirus: how new restrictions on religious liberty vary across Europe," *The Conversation*, 4th May 2020, <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-how-new-restrictions-on-religious-liberty-vary-across-europe-135879> (accessed 4th September 2020).

38 Pekka Pansu, "Massalomatukset iskevät seurakuntien kirkollisverotuloihin toden teolla toukokuussa – 'Se on joillekin seurakunnille erittäin suuri raha'," *Yle*, 29th March 2020, <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-11276423> (accessed 1st September 2020).

39 "Helsinki's Lutheran bishop to meet Pope Francis in Rome," *Yle*, 15th January 2020, [https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/helsinkis\\_lutheran\\_bishop\\_to\\_meet\\_pope\\_francis\\_in\\_rome/11156511](https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/helsinkis_lutheran_bishop_to_meet_pope_francis_in_rome/11156511) (accessed 1st September 2020).

40 "Audience with the Ecumenical Delegation of the Lutheran Church in Finland," *Daily Bulletin of the Holy See Press Office*, 17th January 2020, <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/01/17/200117a.html> (accessed 11th October 2020).