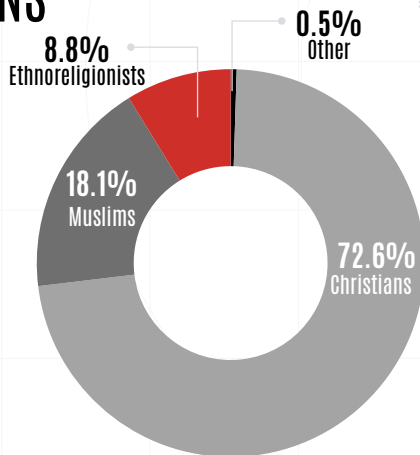




# GHANA

## RELIGIONS



## LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

In terms of respect for fundamental human rights<sup>1</sup> as well as economic and policy development, the Republic of Ghana has one of the best records in West Africa.<sup>2</sup>

Under Article 12 (2) of the constitution, “Every person in Ghana, whatever his race, place of origin, political opinion, colour, religion, creed or gender shall be entitled to the fundamental human rights and freedoms of the individual”.<sup>3</sup> Article 21 (1, c) recognises “freedom to practice any religion and to manifest such practice”.<sup>4</sup>

Like any NGO, religious groups must register with the government. Although registration exempts them from a number of taxes, including taxes on private schools and universities, most do not. Failure to register is not penalised.<sup>5</sup>

Religious instruction in public schools is mandatory and pupils cannot opt out. Elements of both Christianity and Islam are included in the school program. Islamic education is coordinated by a special unit in the Education Ministry. Faith-based private schools are allowed, but they must follow the Ministry’s program, except for international

schools.<sup>6</sup>

In 2000, Ghana signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.<sup>7</sup>

More than two-thirds (72.6%) of the country’s population are Christians. Muslims form a comparatively smaller proportion (18.1%). Most Ghanaian Muslims are Sunnis.<sup>8</sup> Islamic extremism is rare in Ghana.

Relations between Christians and Muslims have traditionally been peaceful.<sup>9</sup> In the Ghana Conference of Religions for Peace (GCRP), of which the Ghana Catholic Bishops’ Conference is a member, Christians and Muslims are working together to shape the country’s future in a spirit of peaceful coexistence.<sup>10</sup>

Thanks to a stable economic and political situation, relations among Ghana’s different religious communities are exemplary in many respects - in contrast to some other states in the region.<sup>11</sup> Ghana’s experience shows that religious tensions are often less dramatic where there is less poverty.

## INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

Ghana has long been regarded as an anchor of stability and an example of peaceful co-existence in West Africa. President Akufo-Addo, a Christian, and Vice President Mahamudu Bawumia, a Muslim, repeatedly emphasize the importance of peaceful religious coexistence in public statements.<sup>12</sup>

In the period under review, concerns continued regarding the growth of “self-styled” pastors provoking debate in parliament as how best to control the phenomenon including suggestions, “that an independent body be established to act as a check on church activity”.<sup>13</sup> Lawmakers, on one hand, expressed unease that so-called one-man churches extort money from the poor to live lavishly, yet on the other, that enacting laws to govern may be unwarranted as the constitution protects freedom of religion.<sup>14</sup>

Protestant umbrella groups including the Christian Council of Ghana, as well as the Ghana Charismatic Bishop’s Conference, issued statements decrying the proposed legislation calling instead for self-regulation.<sup>15</sup>

Debate continued regarding a controversial plan by President Akufo-Addo to build a national interdenominational Christian cathedral sited next to the Ghanaian parliament. The proposal, introduced in March 2017, is touted as a means of creating national unity.<sup>16</sup> The Minister for Inner Cities, Mustapha Abdul-Hamid, stated, “especially in a country like ours that is sharply divided on so many things: ethnicity, politics, etc. A nation like Ghana needs a symbol like that which allows us to come together”.<sup>17</sup>

For the first time, the National Chief Imam, Sheikh Osman Nuhu Sharubutu, attended Easter Sunday services at the Christ the King church in Accra, welcomed by Reverend Father Andrew Campbell, parish priest of the church. The effort was generally warmly received by the Ghanaian public as a sign “fostering religious cohesion and peaceful coexistence”.<sup>18</sup>

Ghana’s efforts towards peaceful co-existence stands in contrast to a region increasingly scarred by violence, predominantly carried out by criminal organisations and Islamist groups.

Ghana borders Burkina Faso in the north and Côte d’Ivoire in the west. Both of these countries are affected to varying degrees by terrorism, though Burkina Faso has been the hardest hit by violence.<sup>19</sup> Since April 2015, a Salafi-Jihadist insurgency has resulted in attacks throughout northern Burkina and poses a threat to the traditionally peaceful coexistence in that country.<sup>20</sup> Terrorist incidents against

Catholic communities, for example in May 2019,<sup>21</sup> continued throughout the reporting period. As of August 2020, concerns are growing that it is just a matter of time before the security situation in Ghana is affected.

This has led to a greater awareness of the need for vigilance in Ghana. The Archbishop of the capital Accra, John Bonaventure Kwofie, noted that with the threat of terrorism drawing closer the ‘alert’ level for the protection of the faithful participating in Sunday religious services and Christian events had to be raised in consultation with the police.<sup>22</sup> Churches are now under protection and people are warned to remain attentive so as to protect “innocent people” who “come to church to worship”.<sup>23</sup>

For example, the Church of Christ the King, one of the parishes in the Archdiocese of Accra, has banned backpacks as part of the heightened security guidelines.<sup>24</sup> The government also stepped up border controls after the 15th February 2019 attacks by a Salafist group in Burkina Faso.<sup>25</sup> On that day, four customs officers were killed at the checkpoint in Nohao, near the Ghanaian border.<sup>26</sup> Fr Antonio César Fernández, a Spanish missionary of the Salesians of Don Bosco, was also killed in the attack.<sup>27</sup> In view of the tenuous security situation, thousands of refugees from Burkina Faso have sought sanctuary in Ghanaian border villages. The Africa Center for Security and Intelligence Studies (ACSIS) warned of possible attacks by Salafist groups based in Burkina Faso on churches and hotels in neighbouring countries such as Ghana.<sup>28</sup>

This was supported by a statement issued on 8th May 2019, in which the United Nations warned of the risk that terrorist activities could spread to the coastal countries of West Africa, including Ghana. Against this backdrop, Archbishop Bonaventure Kwofie proposed that Church leaders develop security strategies of their own for their communities.<sup>29</sup>

At a meeting of the region’s Catholic bishops in November 2019, organised by the Catholic Relief Services (CRS), discussion centred on ways to counter the growing threat from jihadist groups, ethnic antagonisms, and other barriers to development. “The CRS and the leadership of the local Church will address the roots of the conflicts: poverty, youth unemployment, lack of education and the erosion of the social fabric,” reads the bishops’ statement.<sup>30</sup> The bishops also stressed their desire to seek effective paths to conflict prevention, lasting peace and sustainable living.<sup>31</sup>

In March 2020, Ghanaian authorities imposed a lockdown on the country after the World Health Organisation issued a COVID-19 pandemic alert. As in other countries, the Ghanaian government took steps that drastically restricted religious life without eliminating it altogether. This has affected all religions and denominations.<sup>32</sup> On 15th March, President Nana Akufo-Addo announced a ban on gatherings, including religious ones like Masses and funerals. Worship in churches and mosques was interrupted for two months.<sup>33</sup> In early June, places of worship were allowed to reopen under strict conditions.<sup>34</sup>

## PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Despite the increasing number of attacks by criminal groups and radical Islamist militants in the region, Ghana remains a beacon of tolerance. The threat of a spill-over, however, remains real. The future, therefore, of religious freedom in Ghana, although presently stable, is difficult to predict. Encouragement can be drawn from the efforts of Ghana's political and religious leadership to openly seek dialogue and maintain religious cohesion.

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