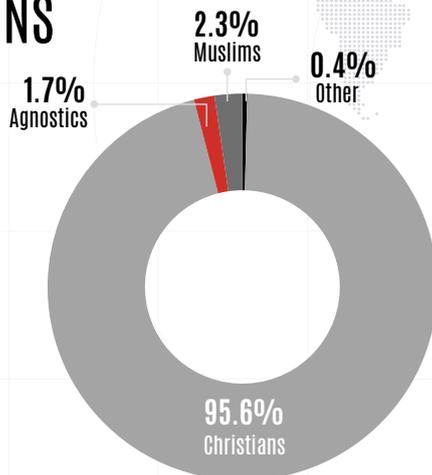




MALTA

RELIGIONS



LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

Article 2(1) of the Constitution of Malta states, “the religion of Malta is the Roman Catholic Apostolic Religion”.¹ This does not mean or imply that Catholicism is the state religion. The Roman Catholic religion is referenced based on the reality that the majority of the citizens of Malta are baptized Catholics. The Constitution, in Article 40(1), enshrines freedom of religion: “All persons in Malta shall have full freedom of conscience and enjoy the free exercise of their respective mode of religious worship”.²

Furthermore, the Constitution also affirms that the State is bound to provide the teaching of the Catholic religion in state schools. This is reiterated in the Agreement between the Holy See and the State of Malta, signed on 16th November 1989, and the Modes of Regulation on Catholic Religious Instruction and Education in State Schools.³ A further agreement between the Holy See and the State of Malta, signed on 28th November 1991, guarantees the existence and the functioning of Church schools.⁴

According to the Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism (1993) the majority Ro-

man Catholic Church seeks to assist other Churches and Christian Traditions in all possible ways when it comes to providing them with suitable places where they can worship God. “Catholic churches are consecrated or blessed buildings which have an important theological and liturgical significance for the Catholic community. They are therefore generally reserved for Catholic worship. However, if priests, ministers or communities not in full communion with the Catholic Church do not have a place or the liturgical objects necessary for celebrating worthily their religious ceremonies, the diocesan bishop may allow them the use of a church or a Catholic building and also lend them what may be necessary for their services. Under similar circumstances, permission may be given to them for interment or for the celebration of services at Catholic cemeteries”.⁵

INCIDENTS

Generally, the relations between Churches are good with ecumenical efforts, particularly in the sharing of church buildings, a feature. Examples include: the Serbian Orthodox community making a temporary agreement with the Ministry for Culture to use the Catholic Church of Our Lady of Pilar in Valletta; the Romanian Orthodox parish of

the Nativity of St John the Baptist making regular use of the Catholic church of St Roque in Valletta; various Coptic Orthodox communities (Egyptian, Ethiopian and Eritrean) using Catholic churches or chapels in Zebbug and in Valletta and; plans (December 2020) for the Catholic Church of St Nicholas in Valletta to be used by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople to serve the spiritual needs of the Greek Orthodox community. Several Evangelical and Pentecostal groups have also flourished in Malta of which some have been offered space to assemble and worship in Catholic parishes (within the parochial premises). Most of the faithful are migrants from Nigeria and Pakistan.

A 2017 application by the Russian Orthodox Church of St. Paul the Apostle to build a new church in Kappara was again delayed in 2018 by the Planning Authority postponing the decision for another six months for further study. The application is opposed by nearby residents and the Nature Trust Malta of the Wied Ghollieqa nature reserve.⁶

Inter-religious relations are also good. On 7th February, 2019, during the UN's World Interfaith Harmony Week, under the patronage of President Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and other faith groups signed the first declaration of friendship and solidarity.⁷ Later, on 8th May, 2019, incoming President George Vella hosted the first interfaith roundtable at the San Anton Palace. The President highlighted, "that continuous interfaith dialogue based on mutual understanding and respect is a key for a harmonious coexistence".⁸

In 2018, Archbishop Charles Jude Scicluna, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Malta, drew social media ire following his retweet of an opinion piece "comparing Malta's political patronage to the Sicilian Mafia".⁹ In a subsequent explanation posted on the Facebook page of the Malta Archdiocese the Archbishop distinguished between his own tweets and opinions he retweets, and stated that those articles retweeted, he hoped, "could lead to a mature discussion, away from partisan politics, which seek the best interests of society".¹⁰

PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The prospects for religious freedom in Malta are good. Religious freedom is enshrined in the Constitution, all faith groups are free to practise their religion, and the presidency has shown concrete efforts to further tolerance and inter-faith dialogue. Evident too are ecumenical efforts by the Catholic Church particularly in the sharing of Church buildings for those without.

SOURCES / ENDNOTES

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- 2 Ibid.
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- 4 Ibid., 633-641.
- 5 Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (25 March 1993), para.137.
- 6 "Decision on new Orthodox church in Kappara put off", *Times of Malta*, 7th July, 2018, <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/decision-on-new-orthodox-church-in-kappara-put-off.683567> [last accessed 9.12.2020].
- 7 "President of Malta meets Pope Francis to discuss about migration and interfaith", *Rome Reports*, 21st March, 2019, <https://www.romereports.com/en/2019/03/21/president-of-malta-meets-pope-francis-to-discuss-about-migration-and-interfaith> [last accessed 9.12.2020].
- 8 "Interfaith Dialogue Session at San Anton Palace", *Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat Malta*, 12th May, 2019, <https://ahmadiyyamalta.org/2019/05/12/interfaith-dialogue-session-at-san-anton-palace> [last accessed 9.12.2020].
- 9 "Updated: Petition calls for removal of Archbishop Scicluna on false premise; explanation given", *The Malta Independent*, 3rd April, 2018, <https://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2018-04-03/local-news/Petition-calls-for-removal-of-Archbishop-Scicluna-on-false-premise-6736187375> [last accessed 9.12.2020].
- 10 Ibid.