



**Institute on Religion and Public Policy:
Religious Freedom in Cyprus**

Executive Summary

(1) The government of Cyprus generally enforces and implements laws that protect religious freedoms as mandated by their constitution. However, their constitution restricts the right of religious groups to use moral compulsion in their proselytization efforts. This is a major hindrance of religious freedom. Additionally, public primary and secondary schools have two hours of religious instruction built into their curriculum daily. These practices need to be abolished in Cyprus in order to ensure religious freedom in Cyprus and comply with all relevant international treaties and covenants on religious freedom.

Institute on Religion and Public Policy

(2) Twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, the Institute on Religion and Public Policy is an international, inter-religious non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring freedom of religion as the foundation for security, stability, and democracy. The Institute works globally to promote fundamental rights, and religious freedom in particular, with government policy-makers, religious leaders, business executives, academics, non-governmental organizations and others. The Institute encourages and assists in the effective and cooperative advancement of religious freedom throughout the world.

Introduction to the Legal Situation

(3) The constitution of Cyprus generally provides for religious freedom. Article 18, Section 1, proclaims, "Every person has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion." Section 3 goes on to provide equal protection to all communities under the law. Section 4 provides the strongest protection of the manifestation of faith, stating that "Every person is free and has the right to profess his faith and to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice or observance, either individually or collectively, in private or in public, and to change his religion or belief."

(4) However, the constitution also restricts certain activities of religious groups. Article 18, Section 5, mandates, "The use of physical or moral compulsion for the purpose of making a person change or preventing him from changing his religion is prohibited."

(5) The prohibition upon moral compulsion for the uses of proselytization is an infringement on one of the most fundamental aspects of religion. Without the

ability to employ moral compulsion, religions are essentially prevented from proselytizing. The Abrahamic faiths (98.7% of all of Cyprus' inhabitants) are specifically instructed to proselytize in the way of moral compulsion and the Cyprus constitution forbids them from doing so.

(6) Article 18, Section 2, is another potential area of concern. Section 2 proclaims that "All religions whose doctrines or rites are not secret are free." The ambiguity of this Section leaves open the possibility of oppression and restriction of esoteric religious groups.

Instances of Official Discrimination

(7) In public primary and secondary schools, instruction on the Greek Orthodox religion is required. However, parents of other religions may choose to excuse their children from such instruction. In 2006 the Ministry of Education proposed to reduce the amount of time devoted to religious instruction from two hours to one hour. Religious organizations, primarily the Church of Cyprus, voiced their rejection of the proposal and the Ministry of Education backed down and has not revisited the issue since.

(8) In June 2008 the Church of Cyprus found itself in a tax evasion battle with the government, which claimed the church owed millions of euros in back taxes. Many of those connected with the church say the claim is part of a power struggle between the church in Cyprus and Cyprus' politicians. The church claimed, as a charity organization, that it was tax exempt while the government claimed that it was only trying to tax the church on its real estate. Both sides have set up committees to discuss the matter.

Conclusion

(9) There are practices and laws which need to be eliminated in Cyprus if freedom of religion is to be truly respected and enforced. Cypriots must amend their constitution to allow religious groups the ability to use moral compulsion in their proselytization efforts. This is a fundamental aspect to religious outreach and religious groups cannot be stripped of that right. Religious instruction in public schools must be ended. Even if minority faiths are allowed to leave the room during this instructional time, it deprives them of classroom contact hours and creates a divide between them and the other students. This is an unacceptable aspect of public education.