

Country Profile

Italy

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This Country Profile provides a brief overview of religious diversity and its governance in the above-named state. It is one of 23 such profiles produced by GREASE, an EU-funded research project investigating religious diversity, state-religion relations and religiously inspired radicalisation on four continents. More detailed assessments are available in our multi-part Country Reports and Country Cases.

Countries covered in this series:

Albania, Australia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Malaysia, Morocco, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

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Total population: 59.8 million

Religious affiliation (percent)

Catholics	74.4
Other religions	3
Non-believers/ atheists	22.6

Source: the Italian Statistical Office (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, ISTAT), database accessed at <http://www4.istat.it/>, 2019, open database

Role of religion in state and government

The Catholic church in Italy is more than just a religious institution; it has also always been a political institution. One of the vastest and most powerful entities on the peninsula, the Papal States controlled most of what is now considered central Italy for about a millennium and played a crucial role in the formation of the Italian state.

When Italian troops conquered Rome in 1870, putting an end to the temporal power of the Pope, the then-Pope Pius IX excommunicated the king and the leaders of the Italian government and ordered “good Catholics” not to recognise its legitimacy and to abstain from participation in Italian political life and parliamentary elections. This is because even though the then Italian Constitution considered Catholicism the official religion of the state, it adopted a regime of separation between church and state based on the principle of individual freedom.

As a result, the first half century of the Italian state was characterised by the absence of Catholic factions in politics. The role of religion in the state changed with Mussolini’s Fascist dictatorship: in 1929 the Holy See and the Italian Kingdom signed the Lateran Treaty, with which Italy recognised Vatican City as an independent state (controlled by the Holy See), provided financial compensation for the loss of the Papal States and restored many of the prerogatives of the Catholic Church. This Treaty is still what regulates the relationship between the Catholic church and the Italian state today, having never been revoked, but only amended when Italy became a Republic in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Nowadays, while a majority of the population still self-identify as Catholic, most claim to go to Church only “occasionally” (35% of the overall population in 2017), while approximately 27% of the total population declare themselves to be frequent churchgoers.

Increasing religious diversity is becoming a normal feature of Italian society, particularly in large cities where globalisation and migration’s effects are more tangible. Italy’s regulatory framework has been slowly changing in response to such diversity, acknowledging some religious minorities through ad-hoc agreements that provide a certain degree of legal recognition and the access to public spaces and tax provisions that come with it. Such agreements, however, hinge on the political will of the state as well as on the capacity of minority religions to speak with a single voice. Muslims, for example, represent Italy’s largest religious minority, numbering approximately 1.5 million. Yet they are divided among various religious associations and have therefore not yet obtained official recognition as a religion by the Italian state.

Freedom of religion

The 1848 Albertine Statute, Italy's first constitutional document, recognised Catholicism as the state's official religion, yet also declared the toleration of "other currently existing confessions". Such "toleration" was eroded and eventually completely done away with under fascism, despite some initial formal window-dressing with the so-called "Law on allowed worships" (law n. 11593/1929) passed in the same year as the Lateran Treaty.

Statutes concerning religious freedom are to be found in articles 2, 3, 8, 19 and 20 of the 1947 Constitution, which read:

2: The Republic shall recognise and protect the inviolable rights of the person, both as an individual and in the social groups where *human personality is expressed*. [...]

3: All citizens shall have equal social dignity and shall be *equal before the law, without distinction of gender, race, language, religion, political opinion, personal and social conditions*. [...]

8: All *religious denominations shall be equally free* before the law. Denominations other than Catholicism shall have the right to self-organisation according to their own statutes, provided these do not conflict with Italian law.

19: Everyone shall be entitled to *profess freely their religious beliefs* in any form, individually or with others, and to promote such beliefs and celebrate rites in public or in private, provided they are not offensive to public morality.

20: No special limitation or tax burden shall be imposed on the establishment, legal capacity or activities of any organisation on the *ground of its religious nature* or its religious or confessional goals.

Despite such provisions, there is ongoing debate in Italy regarding freedom of religion in society. This is illustrated in the controversy surrounding the Lautsi v. Italy legal case. The case was raised by Mrs. Lautsi, who complained about her children having to be exposed to the Catholic crucifix in class while attending public school. Schools are supposed to be non-confessional, and Mrs. Lautsi asked for the crucifix to be removed from the classrooms. When the school in question decided not to do so, the case went first to the regional administrative court of Veneto, then to the supreme administrative court and finally to the European Court of Human Rights. The final decision was that the presence of crucifixes in public schools did not violate the principle of secularism, so Mrs. Lautsi lost the case. The reasoning used by the Italian government to defend the presence of crucifixes in public schools is worth noting here: it claimed that the crucifix symbolised not a religious confession but rather Italian civilization, its historical roots and universal values.

Overall, while freedom of religion is officially ensured in Italy, the current legislative and administrative framework of religious governance is such that not all minority beliefs are tolerated in the same way.

Religiously inspired radicalisation

Between the late 1960s until the late 1980s - the so-called “Years of Lead” - violent attacks, kidnappings and bombings were tied not to religious motives but to political terrorism, both “red” (far-left) and “black” (far-right). Other groups that engaged in political terrorism in the second half of the twentieth century were independence movements in South Tyrol and in Sardinia.

Over the last two decades Italy has not experienced the same degree of violent radicalisation or religiously attributed violent attacks seen elsewhere in Europe. Crimes related to “international Islamic terrorism” have been relatively few. Possible reasons for this include: successful preventive measures (a number of planned attacks have been discovered and blocked before they could be carried out); international networks being less successful in training and organising radicalised individuals; and higher societal control at local community level.

One issue that has increasingly raised the attention of politicians and radicalisation experts is the phenomenon of radicalisation among inmates, often non-nationals, in overcrowded prisons. As a response to a surge in the number of individuals flagged for radicalisation in prisons, the Italian government has activated de-radicalisation and counter-radicalisation programmes carried out by authorized Imams. Meanwhile, it has also started placing detainees sentenced for religiously inspired violent radicalisation in high security special sections (separated from other inmates); when they have finished serving their sentence, many are expelled from Italy (79 in 2018).

In January 2016 a proposed law (draft law no. 3558) on the prevention of radicalisation made it through the Lower House but was eventually not approved by the Senate. One of the concerns raised during the debate was the association of the word “jihadist” with that of “radicalisation” throughout the legislative text. As a matter of fact, radicalisation was described as “the phenomenon of those persons who, even without any stable link with terrorist groups, uphold ideologies of jihadist origin, inspired by the use of violence and terrorism, even by Internet and social media”. Such a phrasing meant that the scope of the law would have been limited towards the prevention of radicalisation of jihadist inspiration, while the violent religiously inspired crimes committed over the past years in Italy have largely been Islamophobic and racist attacks perpetrated by Italian nationals.

Religious diversity governance assessment

Catholicism remains the most widespread and well-established religion in the country - to the point that the historian Paul Ginsborg has defined Italy as a country characterised by a feeling of “widespread religion”. However, the percentage of Italians who identify as Catholics has been slowly but steadily declining, as is the case in most Western European countries. Of those who identify as Catholic, less than one third self-identify as “practicing Catholics”.

With secularisation as a backdrop, immigration to Italy is increasing the percentage of religious members of the population. This is borne out by estimates from 2017 and 2018 showing that only 4.7% of foreigners residing in Italy identify as “atheists or agnostic”, whereas 22.6% of Italian citizens declare themselves to be non-religious. The fact that many Italians would see this as a threat has less to do with the immigrants being religious than it does with them being from non-Catholic countries.

Since the 1990s Italy has moved from being a country of emigrants (with around 25 million Italians estimated to be residing abroad in the 1980s) to a country of both emigration and immigration, with migrants arriving from the Balkans, Central Europe, North Africa and Asia.

In 1948 the current Italian Constitution entered into force, reinstating democracy after two decades of fascist dictatorship. That Constitution incorporated article 7 of the Lateran Treaty, acknowledging both the political treaty which recognises the full sovereignty of the Holy See in the State of Vatican City and the “Concordat” which regulates state-church relations. While the Constitution also guarantees the right of freedom of religion, a number of legal cases such as *Lautsi v. Italy* have in recent years highlighted the difficulty of disentangling religious and state matters.

Overall, Italy’s current religious diversity management approach reflects an underlying framework according to which minority religions are only relevant to the specific minorities. The Catholic religion, on the other hand, is seen as holding a universal cultural value, which can become problematic not only for minority religions but also for an increasing non-religious minority.

About the GREASE project

Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing together European and Asian Perspectives (GREASE)

Involving researchers from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, GREASE is investigating how religious diversity is governed in over 20 countries. Our work focuses on comparing norms, laws and practices that may (or may not) prove useful in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research also sheds light on how different societies cope with the challenge of integrating religious minorities and migrants. The aim is to deepen our understanding of how religious diversity can be governed successfully, with an emphasis on countering radicalisation trends.

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