

Country Profile

Belgium

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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: 11,376,070

Religious affiliation (percent)

Christian	64.2
Muslim	5.9
Jews	0.2
Buddhist	0.2
Folk Religions	0.2
Hindu	<0.1
Other	<0.1
Unaffiliated	29

Source: Pew 2010 figures from: <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projection-table/2010/number/Europe/>

Role of religion in state and government

Belgium is a federal parliamentary constitutional monarchy and has a complex institutional organization comprising three territorial regions (Wallonia, Flanders and the Brussels-Capital region) and three linguistic communities (French, Dutch and German). Although positioned within an overarching federal framework, each also has different governance procedures and policies in important areas as a result of the devolved competencies from the federal government.

Separation of church and state in Belgium is not a formal constitutional separation, however; it is not explicitly mentioned in the Belgian Constitution and Belgium may thus be considered to represent a form of moderate secularism.

The federal state recognizes religions, which affords them particular benefits as well as allowing for degrees of state interference. This has meant Belgian church-state relations being characterized by separation, on the one hand, and the state actively supporting religion on the other. The state recognizes not only the Catholic Church, but also Judaism, Protestantism and Anglicanism, Islam, Orthodoxy Christianity, non-confessional free-thinkers, and Buddhism. The Syrian Orthodox Church and a union of Hindu associations have requested recognition. Nevertheless, Catholicism retains its historical central position in public life; on the King's birthday and national holidays, for instance, the Catholic Church performs civil-religious rituals.

There is an annual general assembly of the National Ecumenical Commission to discuss various religious themes at a national level. The Catholic Church plays a leading role in national and local-level religious affairs between religious organisations and with the state, helping to maintain inter-faith dialogue and promote tolerance among all religious groups.

Freedom of religion

Articles 19 and 20 of the Belgian Constitution fix the positive freedom and negative freedom of religion respectively. State support as found in article 181 has the purpose of guaranteeing these religious freedoms. The state pays the salaries and pensions of the “ministers of religion” (article 181), and article 24 stipulates that “all pupils of school age have the right to moral or religious education at the community’s expense”. There is also provision for religious worship at work, which imposes the obligation “to grant the employee the necessary time to fulfil his religious obligations as well as the civil obligations imposed by the law”.

Article 21 of the Belgian Constitution prohibits the state from “interven[ing] either in the appointment or in the installation of ministers of any religion whatsoever”. Recognized religions receive various other forms of support and privileges from the state, including funding for religious courses in schools (both state and private).

In order to be recognized, a religious faith must organize according to the inherited model based on the Catholic Church. This requires a nationally representative institution, a minimum number of adherents, presence in Belgium for a fairly long period, and evidence that the religion is of social benefit and does not contravene public order in its activities. These requirements have often meant that more recent minority religions have faced difficulties in gaining official recognition.

Beyond formal state recognition, under Belgian law there is no general duty for public or private institutions to grant forms of reasonable accommodation on grounds of religion. In fact, the concept of reasonable accommodation for religious diversity was absent from Belgian public discourse until 2009.

Despite the lack of a general law for reasonable accommodation of religion, various exemptions and accommodations have been enacted. For example, the rule for animal slaughter dictating that animals must first be dazed does not apply to religious ritual slaughter. Claims from minorities on grounds of reasonable accommodation have also been made in relation to areas including dress, diet, prayer space, and holidays for religious celebrations.

Whether such exceptions and accommodations are granted, however, varies among different regions, sectors and institutions. In relation to education, for instance, school children in Flanders may take days off school to celebrate religious festivals and holidays in line with different traditions. In contrast, in the French community no similar provision exists and pupils must rely on more *ad hoc* measures.

Religiously inspired radicalisation

Although not facing a major terrorist attack on its soil prior to 2016, Belgium has frequently found itself at the centre of recent issues surrounding violent religious radicalization. During the 1990s Belgium became a transit country for Islamists. A number of recruitment networks for foreign fighters appeared in Belgium following the 9/11 attacks and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Belgium faced its biggest challenge in relation to violent religious radicalisation following the bombings at Brussels airport and Maelbeek metro station on March 22nd, 2016. ISIS claimed responsibility for those attacks, which killed 32 people and injured 340. Since then Belgium has witnessed several terror-linked attacks, albeit on a much smaller scale.

Belgium has seen more of its citizens per capita leave to fight in recent wars in Algeria, Iraq and Syria than any other European country. And in 2014 it became the first to experience an attack from a returnee foreign fighter when four people were killed at a Jewish museum.

Government action to address radicalization began in 2005 with *Actieplan Radicalisme*, the first action plan against radicalization. 'Plan R' was then revised in 2015. This was led from the federal level but with each region also having its own plan to be carried out in coordination.

Several legislative, institutional and organisational changes have occurred to address the evolving challenges presented by violent radicalisation. These have included legal reforms and expansions criminalising activity related to terrorism with an overall security-led focus. There has been a significant increase in the security budget with a focus on terrorism measures and greater investment in technology to help with these aims. Police and intelligence services power has also been expanded.

There have also been "softer" measures introduced. Two organisations were created by the Wallonia-Brussels Federation: one is CREA, a support and resources centre responsible for supporting and training regional service providers; the other is The Centre for Help and Support for Anyone Concerned by Extremism and Violent Radicalism (CAPREV), which was established to support young people and adults who have been radicalized. CAPREV draws on experts across several fields, focusing on disengagement and reintegration. This also includes measures requiring front line professionals such as teachers and social workers who report to the government any person they suspect of radicalization.

Religious diversity governance assessment

While there is an overarching framework at the federal level, Belgium's devolved competencies along cultural and linguistic lines mean the various regions have developed forms of governing religion that are philosophically and institutionally distinct. The differences between Wallonia and Flanders are particularly pronounced with respect to religious freedom and the basis of approach. Wallonia bears a greater similarity to the French model and can be characterised as *laissez-faire* assimilationist, adopting more radically secular and colour-blind policy approaches. By contrast, Flanders, which inherited its approach from the Dutch model, can be characterised as multiculturalist and regarded as bearing greater similarity to the UK.

Nevertheless, more recently a common driving force of pragmatism can be observed as both regions mix assimilationist as well as multiculturalist policy measures. The most significant regional differences concern the balance of emphasis between cultural homogeneity and cultural diversity, on the one hand, and the degree of interventionism each considers necessary to achieve the preferred balance for successful integration on the other. In recent years, these trends have notably been stimulated by concerns over the accommodation of Muslim populations.

As with other countries in Western Europe, recent debates about the governance of religious diversity have centred on Muslims. At the federal level, in terms of Belgian government interference, the social and political context has been marked by fears of religious radicalisation, with the government stipulating further interventions affecting the recognition of Islam. These interventions are not applied to other religions, and Muslims have been subjected to a greater degree of scrutiny. For example, the government organizes elections for representative candidates and screens these candidates.

Two further areas of note relate to places of religious worship and to religious signs and symbols in the public sphere. Notably, these measures have been applied only to Islam and Muslims, even where they are framed in more general terms. Moreover, Belgium has introduced a criminal ban on face-covering in the public sphere, provoked by the desire to outlaw the wearing of the *niqab*. Further ad hoc and inconsistent bans on religious signs and symbols stimulated by concerns over the headscarf have appeared in both Wallonia and Flanders, although the bans have been justified with appeal to different reasons.

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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