

Greenland

On law & religion in Greenland

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GREENLAND

(draft version Aug 2014)

I. Social Facts

Greenland is placed in the Arctic and is inhabited by 57.000 people. Probably 20.000 Greenlanders live abroad, most in Denmark. 95% are members of the Folkchurch. Small Catholic, Baptist, Jehovahs Witnesses and Bahai communities exist. Confirmation and baptism of children in the Folkchurch are central cultural-religious dimensions in society. – In 2000, a new, full translation of the Bible into Greenlandic appeared (the first being published in 1900); new rituals in Greenlandic were authorized in 2005 and a new hymnbook in 2008. Services are held in Greenlandic.

II. Historical Background

Christianity came to Greenland with Leif Viking in year 1000. The Nordic population disappeared, but a group of Inuit's, migrated to Greenland around 1300, were Christianized by Hans Egede from 1721.

Greenland came under Danish authority 1380 and remained a colony under Danish sovereignty at the Peace in Kiel 1814. – A law of 1905 established a public school system and the Church in Greenland. The Church was organized as a geographically based parochial structure in a deanery under the bishop in Copenhagen. Churches were built and a seminary to educate catechists was established in Nuuk.

By the amended constitution of 1953, Greenland became a region in Denmark and people, living in Greenland, gained Danish citizenship on equal terms, including freedom of religion. – Greenland became a member of EEC with Denmark in 1972, but opted out in 1985. - In 1979, Greenland got Home Ruling, including delegation of administrative governance of ecclesiastical affairs to Greenlandic authorities, whereas legislative powers remained in Denmark.

On 21st of June 2009 (the Greenlandic national day) Self-Ruling within the framework of the Danish constitution came into force. Greenland was by international law recognized as a people. Independent legislative, administrative and judicial authorities were established in Greenland, based on public elections. – Legislative powers in Greenland include authority regarding church and religion matters, based on Grl § 4 and 66.

III. Legal Sources and Basic Approaches to Religion and Belief

A law on the Greenlandic Folkchurch was given by the legislative authorities in Greenland 19th May 2010; the revised version came into force 1st January 2014.

IV. Individual Freedom of Religion and Belief

Individual freedom of religion and belief includes the same scope, minority protection, protected activities and limitations as in Denmark.

V. The legal Status of Religious Communities

No special legislation has been given regarding religious communities in general. They live an independent life. – The Greenlandic evangelical-Lutheran Church is named the Folkchurch and established by law of 2010. The church is regarded part of the common Folkchurch in the Danish kingdom. The church is governed under the authority of legislative, administrative and judiciary within the Self-Ruling system of Greenland. – The Greenlandic government has the superior responsibility for the church and governs it after negotiations (also regarding financial dimensions) with the bishop; the bishop is the daily responsible for church governance within this framework. The congregations have representations; they can comment on the budget to the Dean; propose changes in the church building to the priest; negotiate regarding internal affairs and take part in election of priests, dean and bishop. – The Greenlandic Folkchurch is thus much more hierarchical and parochially organized than the Folkchurch in Faroe Islands and Denmark.

VI. Religious Autonomy

The government of Greenland rules on hymnbook, rituals & liturgy, conditioned on compulsory negotiations with the bishop after advices from governmental committees. - Appointment of priests, catechists, dean and bishop are based on elections internal in the church. - Disputes can be referred to higher instances within the church. Reference of disputes from the Bishop to the Government is limited to legal matters. Thus theological conflicts are resolved by the Bishop.

VII. Education

A compulsory school subject, called ‘religion’ is non-confessional and can be examined equally with other school subjects. The church has no competence anymore in this or other school matters.

VIII. Religion and Personnel Matters

The bishop, dean and priests in the Greenlandic Folkchurch are civil servants, appointed by the Greenlandic government. The bishop can grant an individual exemption for religious service of theological reasons. - Catechists keep up ecclesiastical life in settlements, where priests only come occasionally. They perform services in church, baptize the children, but they do not arrange confirmation or Eucharist; and they do not have authority to perform marriages. -

IX. Finance

The Greenlandic Folkchurch is financed over the general budget law for Greenland through common national taxes, paid by all tax payers in Greenland. This is more parallel to the system in Norway and Iceland than to the Danish system of church taxes for church members only. However, other religious communities do not get any financial support.

X. Religious Assistance in and Access to Public Institutions

Children, born in Greenland, must be given a name within a year. The naming can be part of baptism; if not, the name is given by information to the local church office. All people who die while living in Greenland, have a right to be buried at the church cemeteries. Thus, the Greenlandic Folkchurch still keeps the civil registration of people in Greenland.

XI. Religion and Family Matters

There is civil marriage in Greenland; the Greenlandic Folkchurch has authority to perform marriages with civil effect; and so has the priest in the Pentecostal congregation.

XII. Religion in Criminal Law and Other Public Regulations

The Criminal Law for Greenland makes it a crime to disturb the services or the peace at cemeteries; also discrimination based on among others religion or belief is a crime; blasphemy however not.

Select Documents

Lov nr 453 af 13. June 2009 om Grønlands Selvstyre [Law on Self-Ruling in Greenland]

Kirkeloven pr 1. Januar 2014 [Law on Ecclesiastical Affairs for the Greenlandic Folkchurch, revised pr 1st January 2014]

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