

Is Christianity Legal in Iran?

Christianity, a "people of the book," has always been particularly respected by Islam. Nonetheless, the social and legal freedom given to Christian believers has varied over time, depending on the government involved. Shiite Islam is the official religion of Iran. Iranian policy officially authorizes Christianity, except for Islamic converts. Christians in practice have been persecuted in various ways. Christianity in Iran is only "legal" to a degree.

Christianity in Islam

Sumbul Ali-Karamali has written various books discussing Islam, both for [adults](#) and [young adults](#). Her argument is that Islam itself is an open-minded faith. She argues that the problem is a twisting of the Islam faith, including by certain governmental actors.

Let there be no compulsion in religion, for the truth stands out clearly from falsehood. So whoever renounces false gods and believes in God has certainly grasped the firmest, unshakable hand-hold. And God is All-Hearing, All-Knowing.

- The *Koran*, Islamic Holy Book

Religion is personal and faith should not be forced on a believer. The [golden age of Islam](#) in medieval times included more religious freedom than was offered in medieval Europe. And, the "people of the Book" ([Christians, Jews, and Muslims](#)) in particular were treated fairly.

Islam developed in the Middle East and was inspired by the existing religions of the area. The holy book of Islam, the *Koran*, has many figures such as Abraham and Jesus, that would be familiar to Jews and Christians. Judaism and Christianity are in effect family.

Note: *The translating of the original language, Arabic, is an inexact science. Quran, Qur'an, and Koran are each sometimes used for the name of the holy book of Islam.*

It is a basic truth that defining the terms of major religions will lead to a lot of debate. The same thing arises here. The freedom and openness warranted by each faith are greatly controversial. Some Muslims have a more restrictive view of what is proper, including the correct application of religious law (Shariah). This includes defining what are true "Christian" beliefs.

Religious Freedom in the 21st Century

Religious freedom is not just honored in the United States, particularly by the First Amendment which protects both free exercise and stopping a wrongful blending of church and state (establishment). Religious freedom currently is recognized as a basic [human right](#). Horrible events such as the Holocaust show the need for a baseline that applies worldwide.

How specific countries honor these rights is obviously a variable thing. Nations like China might have a general statement in their constitutions that respect religious liberty. Nonetheless, they can have broad exceptions to protect public welfare as understood in that country. China's "public welfare" includes proper respect for communist beliefs and leadership.

[IS CHRISTIANITY LEGAL IN CHINA? FIND OUT HERE!](#)

Religious freedom might also be honored in the breach. We saw a bit of that in this country. Racial equality for a long time (some say today too) was at most a formal requirement with inequality the actual practice for most non-whites. Private discrimination, including of Jews, also made equality in practice not respected. And, the government often looked on silently.

Religion in Modern Day Iran

The [Iranian Revolution](#) firmly tied together church and state. Iran's population is predominantly Shiite Muslim, and Shiism is the official religion of the state. Shia is one of the two major branches of Islam. Modern-day Iran [establishes a conservative form](#) as the law of the land.

(*Persepolis*, an autobiographical graphic novel by Marjane Satrapi, is an excellent introduction to times of the Iranian Revolution and how it felt to grow up under its dictates.)

Most people in Iran (about 90%) are Shiite Muslims with most of the rest members of the Sunni branch of the religion. Nearly all of the about eighty-six million people are Muslim. There are about 150,000 Christians in Iran today. The largest non-Muslim group is members of the [Bahá'í Faith](#) (300,000). There are about 65,000 Jews and various other religious groups.

Christianity In Iran Today

Limited Religious Freedom

Iran's Constitution only protects Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians (excluding converts from Islam) as recognized religious minorities permitted to worship and form religious societies "within the limits of the law." This is defended as required by Islamic teachings.

Iran has a parliamentary system of government. An earlier rule that reserved a few seats for minority groups was retained by the Iranian Revolutionary Constitution. Three seats are reserved for members of the Christian faith, including two seats for the country's Armenian

Christians, and one for Assyrians. These are small but historically long-lasting communities. One seat each is also reserved for representation of the Jewish and Zoroastrian faiths.

The members of the Bahá'í Faith are left out. They are not recognized as a protected minority faith but instead are seen as dangerous heretics that are merely a political organization.

A recent [U.S. Report on Religious Freedom in Iran](#), for instance, addresses (to cite but one example) how Iran officials "conducted multiple arrests of Baha'is in their homes or workplaces in the last week of September without providing reasons or charges."

Islam-Christian Converts Left Out

Christians are authorized to practice their faith. But, note there is a glaring exception for [converts from Islam](#). The argument provided is that Islam prohibits Muslims from denying their faith. The right to convert to another faith is a basic matter of religious freedom. Since its origins Christianity is a religion that welcomes converts.

And, what about [mixed families](#), including those with a parent who is Christian and a parent who is Muslim? You might get in trouble merely by "converting" your own child.

Other Limitations

Iran is a theocracy, a nation where a specific religion is the official law and land, and many liberties are restricted in the name of religion and morality.

Religious freedom, including for Muslims themselves, is threatened in such a regime. Religious expression by all believers that is seen as threatening the social good can result in private and public persecution. It is not surprising the First Amendment protects religion and speech.

Certain groups in particular, including women and members of the LGBTQ community, are discriminated against. Many people are unable to practice their religious faith, including Christianity as they believe is appropriate. The "limits of the law" in this way block Christianity.

For instance, many Christian faiths welcome gays and lesbians, including performing same-sex marriages. Same-sex relationships in many ways [are criminal](#) in Iran today.

International Response

The United States is promoted as an evil empire in Iran, a term that historically was applied by this country to the Soviet Union. The United States is the "Great Satan."

The government of Iran receives a lot of criticism from the United States and international organizations. Iran has limited religious and political freedom with many reports of human rights abuses. Iran also has been found guilty of promoting international terrorism.

One [British report](#) on the treatment of Iranian Christians is a mixed deal. It held that as a whole Christians were "not at real risk of persecution or serious harm from the state," but individual discrimination was present. The key victims of persecution were converts from Islam.

Nonetheless, Christian churches had to be registered with the state. They were monitored and the "house churches" not registered were targets. Christians deemed to be "Zionists" (promoting Israel) were particularly subject to persecution. Other abuses were cited.

A [United States report](#) is more critical. First, it was noted that Iran was an Islamic state and things like criticism of the Prophet Muhammed (deemed blasphemy) was illegal. Enemies of the state often were labeled with so-called religious-based crimes. Things such as the "proper" clothing for women, based on a certain interpretation of religious doctrine, were targeted.

Such crimes repeatedly interfere with how a self-professed Christian would practice their faith. The report again noted that converts from Islam and Christian sects not recognized by the state are particularly targeted. "Christianity" officially turns on arbitrary labels:

Since the law prohibits citizens from converting from Islam to another religion, the government only recognizes the Christianity of citizens who are Armenian or Assyrian Christians, because the presence of these groups in the country predates Islam, or of citizens who can prove they or their families were Christian prior to the 1979 revolution. The government also recognizes Sabean-Mandaeans as Christian, even though they state they do not consider themselves as such.

Evangelical Christians are a major sect in the United States with significant political power. Iran does not recognize evangelical Protestants as Christians.

The "wrong" type of believers can be detained and "disappeared" for long periods of time. Iran also allows physical punishments such as whipping and have other means of pressure such as employment discrimination. A marriage in an unrecognized church has limited protection.

Final Thoughts

The United States has a First Amendment in recognition of the importance of religious liberty as well as a history of abuses that shows it is still needed. Various religious groups and nonbelievers have been discriminated against over the years. We should remain vigilant.

Nonetheless, as a whole, Christianity is clearly legal in the United States. I might argue that abortion rights are necessary for this to be completely true since many Christian faiths believe that should be a matter of individual belief. But, as a whole, surely Christianity is legal.

The case is much hazier in Iran. Christianity is recognized but even then only if you did not convert from Islam. Or, are a member of the "wrong" Christian sect. And, if you are Christian, the law interferes with religious liberty in many ways. The ability to be arrested for blasphemy is a case in point. Blasphemy prosecutions make certain religious statements of faith illegal.

Is Christianity legal in Iran? If you are a convert from Islam or the wrong sect, clearly not. Other Christians do have some recognition, some even getting a representative in the Parliament. But, it is a limited sort of freedom. Only the "right" type is legal.