

Jews and Muslims applaud German vote to protect circumcision

by [Lauren Markoe](#)

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The German parliament has relieved Muslims and Jews by passing a law Wednesday (Dec. 12) that allows infant male circumcision for religious reasons.

A spring ruling by a regional court in Cologne equated the practice with inflicting bodily harm, and resulted in charges against a German rabbi for circumcising a baby boy on the eighth day of life, as Jewish law dictates.

"Circumcision is critical to Jewish and Muslim religious life," said Deidre Berger, director of the Berlin office of the American Jewish Committee. "The German parliament's action should put to rest reprehensible allegations that Jewish and Muslim religious upbringing violates children's rights and endangers the welfare of children."

Just as circumcision in Judaism marks the covenant between God and the Jewish people, Muslim tradition also sees it as an act to include a male in the religious community. Islam is generally not as exacting about the age of the child or when the procedure should be performed.

Leaders of Germany's 250,000 Jews and 4 million Muslims lobbied hard against the Cologne ruling, calling it an act of religious intolerance.

The new law, passed by a 434-100 vote, with 46 abstentions, allows parents to opt for circumcision for their sons by a trained practitioner. After six months of age, a doctor must perform it.

Still, many Europeans and a growing number of Americans are rejecting ritual circumcision as a painful mutilation and permanent dulling of sexual pleasure inflicted upon a person who is too young to consent. The individual's right to bodily integrity, anti-circumcision activists argue, should trump parents' religious beliefs.

U.S. circumcision rates have declined steeply since the 1970s, when about 80 percent of baby boys were circumcised, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In 2010, about 55 percent were circumcised.

In San Francisco last year, a ballot question that garnered more than 12,000 signatures called for a ban on the practice, but the measure was ruled illegal by a California judge before it could be put to a vote. As in Germany, Muslim and Jewish groups protested the proposal as an assault on religious freedom.

The American Academy of Pediatrics has determined that the benefits of circumcision – including a lower risk of sexually transmitted diseases – outweigh the risks, but are not great enough to recommend universal circumcision on baby boys, and advises that the decision should be left to parents. —RNS