



German court bans male circumcision, sparks outrage among Jews, Muslims

By msnbc.com and news services

BERLIN - Jewish and Muslim groups protested on Wednesday after a German court banned the circumcision of young boys for religious reasons, Reuters reported. The ban applies to the Cologne region of Germany.

The court in the western city of Cologne handed down the decision on Tuesday in the case of a doctor who was prosecuted for circumcising a four-year-old Muslim boy.

The doctor circumcised the boy in November 2010 and gave him four stitches, [the Guardian reported](#). When the boy started bleeding two days later, his parents took him to Cologne's University hospital, where officials called police. The doctor was ultimately acquitted on the grounds that he had not broken a law.

The court ruled that involuntary religious circumcision should be made illegal because it could inflict serious bodily harm on people who had not consented to it. Male circumcision is part of Jewish and Muslim religious tradition.

The ruling said boys who consciously decided to be circumcised could have the operation. No age restriction was given, or any more specific details.

The Central Council of Jews in Germany called the ruling an "unprecedented and dramatic intrusion" of the right to religious freedom and an "outrageous and insensitive" act.

"Circumcision for young boys is a solid component of the Jewish religion and has been practiced worldwide for millennia. This religious right is respected in every country around the world," President Dieter Graumann said in a statement.

Fewer than 20 percent of boys are circumcised in Germany; by contrast, 56 percent of male newborns in the United States were circumcised in 2005, [according to the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality](#).

In the U.S., circumcision rates vary by region. In the West, fewer than one-third of newborn boys are circumcised; in the Northeast, nearly two-thirds of newborn boys are circumcised.

Parents who choose to circumcise their boys have said they did so because they believe it improves hygiene and can reduce the risk of the spread of disease, HIV in particular.

"Fatal to the freedom of religion"

According to the court ruling, "the fundamental right of the child to bodily integrity outweighs the fundamental rights of the parents."

But the Central Council of Muslims in Germany called the sentence a "blatant and inadmissible interference" in the rights of parents.

Rabbi Aryeh Goldberg called the ruling "fatal to the freedom of religion," the Guardian reported. He told Haaretz that it went against the European Union's convention on human rights.

"The child's body is permanently and irreparably changed by the circumcision. This change runs counter to the interests of the child, who can decide his religious affiliation himself later in life," it said.

Germany is home to about four million Muslims and 120,000 Jews. In Judaism, 8-day-old boys are circumcised to recall the covenant established between God and the Hebrew patriarch Abraham.

The time for Muslim circumcision varies according to family, region and country.

Concerned the ruling could be followed in other parts of the country and that it could prevent doctors carrying out circumcisions for fear of prosecution, the Central Council of Jews urged the German parliament "to provide legal clarity in order to prevent attacks on religious freedom."

Reuters and msnbc.com's Isolde Raftery contributed to this story.