

## **Theological Identity and Forms of Legitimation In Old National Churches**

### **- The Case of Norway**

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Church of Norway is both a territorial church and an old national church. 76,9% of the people (total population around 5 millions) are members of this church, while around 10% are members of religious and life stance groups outside the Church. But at the same time multi-religiousness and pluralisation is increasing, due to immigration and secularisation.

Norway has a high degree of immigration, but only 13% of the immigrants come from Muslim areas. The numbers of Muslims were in 2011: 106.700. Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians from East and Central Europe have (2012: estimated 200.000 Catholics) been increasing the most together with young Swedes who are searching for jobs in Norway. To meet the new situation with increasing multi-religiousness and pluralism the Church has chosen dialogue and co-operation.

From the Age of Reformation in 1536-37 to the Norwegian Parliament's changes of the Constitution in May 2012, the relation between Church and state remained in principle the same. Ruling of the Church was an integrated part of the ruling of the state. The King was head of the Church, and the superintendents and pastors were servants of both God and King. The main change came when a parliamentary system was introduced from 1884, 'the King' was now understood as 'the King in Council of State'.

During the era from the French Revolution in 1789 to World War I Norway went through dramatic changes. It went from absolutism to democracy, from a society

of estates to a society of equals, from an agrarian society to urbanization and early industrialization, from being a part of a multinational composite Danish state to become a nation state. These changes made also an impact on the Church.

The Norwegian constitution of May 1814 was liberal for its time; but it continued the policy of the former Absolutism to protect religious unity. The Evangelical-Lutheran Religion remained the official religion of the state. During the Constitutional Assembly at Eidsvoll in the spring of 1814 freedom of religion had been mentioned as one of the principles, but in the final version it had vanished.

From the middle of the 19th century to the present the church order has been revised and modernised several times. But the relation between Church and state has remained much the same although one may say that a democratization of the Church became a part of a general political democratization. Several proposals of separating Church and state, however, have been turned down . That has changed. On April 10 2008 a political agreement between all parties in Parliament was signed. The main points were:

The Parties agreed to initiate a process where the common goal was to transfer appointment of bishops and deans from the Government to an ecclesiastical body or diocesan synod.

The Norwegian Church should, however, still hold a special foundation in the Constitution (cf. new §16).

The Norwegian Church organization and business should continue to be regulated by a separate church law, without the church being defined as a separate legal entity.

The state should continue to reward and protect the employer's responsibility for the bishops, deans, pastors and others employed in ecclesiastical positions of

regional and central church bodies, which implied that pastors should continue to be civil servants.

In May 2012 the Norwegian Parliament abolished the former paragraph 2 of the Constitution and introduced a new value paragraph which now says that Norway's values are based on its Christian and humanist heritage. Further it was underlined that the Constitution shall ensure democracy, rule of law and human rights.

The national values are thus no longer solely based in religion, but also in human rights. This sounds nice, but it also conceals that human rights do not consist of a definite number of rights. They are constantly in development and under debate (cf. the debate on LGBT-rights).

One consequence of the changed relations is that the responsibility for appointments of bishops and deans no longer is a task for the Government, but for diocesan councils (appointment of deans) and the board of the National Council (appointment of bishops). The National Council is elected by the General Synod, but it is quite unclear if it has competency to assess potential candidates.

A consequence of the parliamentary decisions of May 2012 is that Church of Norway no longer has a proper church order. For that reason it is ruled by customary law, i.e. the former church law of 1996 is still used with a few exceptions. The leader of the National Council has said that he thinks a new church order will not be ready before at least in 2017. This illustrates that to the politicians the main point in changing the relations between state and church was to treat religions and life stances more equally. While to church leaders the main point was the transfer of power of appointments of deans and bishops.

After May 2012 the Evangelical-Lutheran Religion is not the public religion of the state, and according to the new paragraph 16 of the Constitution all Norwegians have freedom of religion. Further this paragraph ascertains that Church of

Norway is an Evangelical-Lutheran Church and remains as Norway's Folk Church. For this reason it shall be supported by the state, and all life stand communities shall according to their number of members be supported in same way.

At the same it is obvious that there are strong theological tensions between different groups in the Church. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century religious revivalism made a strong impact on church and society. From the middle of the century revivalism developed into organized societies promoting mission both abroad and inside Norway and at the same time establishing a sort of free churches within the boundaries of the State Church. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century modernisation of society challenged the traditional identity of the Church and split the clergy. It resulted in a major conflict within Church and theology, and led to the establishing of a private theological faculty (1908) which claimed to represent orthodoxy against modern, liberal theology.

The benefit of having a state church was its ability to keep the church together in spite of these strong theological controversies. After the changes of May 2012 there is a possibility that groups of the conservative wing, will choose to become a separate Lutheran Low Church.

In any case, what it means to be an Evangelical-Lutheran Church was not an important part of the political discussions that preceded the constitutional changes. But it probably signals continuity with the former State Church and its confessional basis, defined in Norwegian Laws of 1687. The knowledge of what this implies, however, seems to be quite low among most of leading politicians. That is not surprising since the same is evident among many of the Norwegian church leaders.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The former bishop of Nidaros gave his permission to move a so-called stone of St. Olav (a sort of relic) into the church of Stiklestad (July 2007), the place the King was killed in a battle in 1030. The present bishop, Tor Singaas, has claimed that 'imitatio Christi' is a Christian concept which legitimizes a cult of St. Olav. The leading bishop, Helga Byfuglien, who is located to the Cathedral of Nidaros, has

The concept of a 'Folk Church' represents also something new. It is nicked from the Danish Constitution, and in the Norwegian ecclesiastical debate it is a type of watchword. But it is not obvious what it means.

The concept of a 'Norwegian folk church' contains some of the same ambiguity as the concepts of people and nation. It is used both in a 'democratic' and in an 'ethnic cultural' sense, and these are often mixed together. On one side 'folk church' describes an inclusive church which comprises the whole, or at least a majority, of the people, and which is governed by the people. On the other side it is used in the same sense as a 'national church', i.e. it is a part of the national characteristics to belong to a certain church, which expresses the national history and spirit. This type of national religiousness has lately become more visible also in Norway and was used in the process of establishing a new bishopric for a so-called leading bishop.

Until 2011 Church of Norway consisted of 11 bishoprics. Traditionally the bishop of Oslo was the leader among the other bishops. But the National Council suggested in 2009 to establish an office as the 12<sup>th</sup> and leading bishop, located to Oslo. The Government followed the suggestion, but the location became a hot political controversy. The Centre Party is one of three parties in a red-green coalition Government. This party wanted strongly to locate a new bishopric located to the city of Trondheim (the main city in the bishopric of Nidaros) as a part of their support of district policy. Locally it was argued that in the Medieval Age Trondheim had been an ecclesiastical centre and an archbishopric with a lot of pilgrimages from all of Europe to the tomb of St. Olav. Further it was stressed that the Cathedral of Trondheim is a national shrine. Few seemed to remember that a Lutheran reformation had taken place in 1537, and that the tomb of St. Olav was erased. Today the Cathedral which was a ruin until late 1860s is restored to a sort of replica of the original gothic building.

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no opinion on this matter. But she remembers that Luther criticized such cult (cf. *Vårt Land* July 23 2012 and June 7 2010).

The Government decided in the end that the new bishopric should be located to Trondheim, and one of the four female bishops was appointed leading bishop. But a female bishop ruined the hope of the High-Church romanticists to re-erect an archbishopric of Nidaros. At the same time the new leading bishop made it clear that she would spend most of her time in Oslo.

One may ask why it suddenly became so important to have a leading bishop. The answer seems simple. This office became important when it was determined that there would be a change of relation between church and state. The bishops seem to want to speak with one voice and be represented by one person in the public sphere. At the same time it seems that they have realised that they do not possess sufficient competence to deal with all the issues they are engaged in. None of the twelve bishops has a PhD. For that reason they have appointed a group of experts to give them advises. In any case it illustrates how different groups and bodies in the Church try to position themselves in the power vacuum which the change of relations between church and state has created. But the state will through the financial responsibility of the Church in any case have a possibility to continue to exert influence.

A part of the political agreement of April 2008 was that a study should be done to establish municipal 'life stance neutral ceremony rooms' to be used at funerals and weddings. The problem was, and still is, that the concept of 'life stance neutrality' is rather unclear. Any person who has studied existentialism or hermeneutics will be aware of that. To ask and search for meaning of life is a part of being human, and the answers are never neutral. The intent seems to be that all religions and life stances should be treated with respect and as equally as possible.

I have checked Statistics Norway and found that the great majority of Norwegians for the last decade have had a Christian funeral (92% in 2011), and

the figures have been rather constant. A small number, however, have had a civic or secular humanist funeral. After the changes of the Constitution in May 2012 the Ministry of Culture under the leadership of Minister Anniken Huitfeldt (Labour Party), introduced a ritual for life stance neutral funerals. 'Life stance neutrality' was, however, exchanged with 'life stance openness'. The Minister has all the same been accused for not understanding the difference between a politician as her self and a life stance or religious leader. The closest parallel to this initiative may be the so-called civil funerals in Sweden. Another role model could be 'Jugendweihe' in the former East Germany.

There are two also types of confirmations: Church Confirmation and Secular Humanistic Confirmation. Around between 15-17% choose the secular type. The statistics also show that the number of church confirmands is stable or slightly increasing. In 2011 65% of all 15 year-olds were confirmed in the church. But the number varies a lot with the lowest number in Oslo (40% of all 15-year-olds in 2011), while the national average was 65%.

The numbers of infants becoming baptised have gone down. But in the cases where one of the parents is member of Church of Norway, the numbers are surprisingly still 90%.

Cohabitation has become rather usual among the young generations, and the number of church weddings have dropped to less than 50%, while the numbers of divorces and separations have been increasing, but dropped in 2012. Surprisingly, however, the number taking part in church services has increased. In 2011 more than 6.2 million people attended services (Statistics Norway). In addition probably more than 2 million attended church funerals. Also the number of people who participated in the Eucharist during the ordinary services has been increasing and reached in 2011 more than 1.2 million communicants. In any case there are more people in church on an ordinary Sunday, than at football matches, although sports have become our modern civil religion.

After the reformation in 1537 the former Cathedral schools were turned into Latin schools. And in 1736 a law of confessional confirmation was introduced. In order to read the Bible and the explanations of the Catechism, training in reading was made compulsory for all children (1739). This was a church school which during the 19<sup>th</sup> century gradually was modernized and secularized. In 1969 a new school law also made it clear that the Christian education in school no longer should be understood as the Church's baptismal instruction. For this reason the Norwegian Parliament on May 27<sup>th</sup> 2003 voted to reform the Church' religious education. The goal was to stimulate the development of own identity and understanding of own culture and traditions in a society where the mix of different religious and secular communities was increasing. The idea was to make children and young people secure in their religious identity, which provides the foundation for respect and tolerance in interactions with people of other faiths or with other belief systems. The reform underwent a broad political and ecclesiastical hearing and is regarded as the Church' key strategic mission for the coming years.

Diaconal work is an important part of the role of Church in contemporary Norway. The National Council has adopted a plan for such work. This plan is based on the following definition of diakonia: "Diakonia is the caring ministry of the Church. It is the Gospel in action and is expressed through loving your neighbour, creating inclusive communities, caring for creation and struggling for justice" (2007).

In Norway we have around 220 parish deacons, but a lot more people with diaconal education are working in diaconal organizations, institutions and also in other positions in the church-structure".

The establishment of a Norwegian welfare society during the 20<sup>th</sup> century took over many of the tasks that the Christian diaconal organizations so far had carried out. But in stead of conflicts you got an interaction or a joint venture

where Christian Diakonia are providers of services and tasks, while state and municipalities finance what it costs.

The diaconical work was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century linked with missionary work and evangelizing. But now diakonia has got its eigenvalue as 'the Gospel in action' and it is based on Christian humanism. Two of the diaconal organizations are of special interest: The Church's City Mission and The Norwegian Church Aid.

Several challenging reforms have been started in Church of Norway during the last years. The most successful has been a new translation of the Bible. The Norwegian Bible Society introduced this translation in October 2011. The language is modern and makes biblical text understandable for people of today. Further the translation is based on the oldest manuscripts and is therefore more reliable. This first Norwegian translation of the Bible for 30 years topped the country charts book almost every week between its publication and the end of the year, selling nearly 80,000 copies. For almost a year it topped the book sale.

A reform of worship services and church rituals was started as a demand from young people Synod in 2003. The Committee for worship has adopted the following core values: flexibility, involvement and indigenous contextualization. Criticism of these liturgical reforms will, however, be quite low-key compared with what probably will follow of a complete revision of the Norwegian Hymn Book which is due to be ready this year. The reason is that people have an emotional relationship with the Psalms. Every time a new hymn book has been introduced, or the old one has been revised, it has caused a loudly public discussion.

The Lutheran Church is a church of the Word, where reading of Bible texts and preaching are some of the most important parts of the Service. But at the same time the role of the Church in people's daily life often is linked to other means of expression like music, literature, images, movies, dramas and dance. In addition the church building is many places the most used culture building.

A national church survey in 2000 showed that it was the non-verbal expressions, holidays, silence, organ music and hymn singing people liked best about the service. In 2009 there were 1.391.963 people present at 10.970 concerts and other cultural events in the churches. In 2010 this had increased to 1.410.877 people divided into 11 591 events

Finally some reflections on Church and the terror attacks of July 22 2011. The first terror attack was a bomb aimed against the Government, and it killed 8 people in the executive government quarter and wounded many others. The second attack was a massacre at Utøya, aimed against the Labour Party's youth camp, where the perpetrator murdered 69 people and wounded more than 100.

Two days after the terror there should be celebrated an ordinary Sunday Service in the Cathedral of Oslo. It became a Mourning Service, and the Royal Family, the Prime Minister, the Government and members of the youth organisation of Labour Party were present in the crowded Cathedral. The Service was also transmitted on TV. The strongest impressions gave the picture of a King who dried his tears and the heartfelt speech of the Prime Minister.

The Cathedral of Oslo became the focal point for grief, and a type of spontaneous altar grew outside the church. It consisted of thousands and thousands of flowers and handwritten notes of grieve. In the following weeks a majority of the funerals took place in crowded churches.

A year after the terror a national day of remembrance was held on Sunday July 22. The tragedies and the many initiatives to cope with chaos, death and grief tell something about how important rituals are. In Norway these rituals are based in a history of more than one thousand years of Christianity and belonging to the Church, although that does not necessarily mean believing.

The significance of history and traditions, however, seem to have been absent from a steering committee for memorial monuments which the Government and the Ministry of Culture appointed to find a place for a memorial monument. The leader of the committee was Åse Kleveland, former Minister of Culture (Labour Party) and present chairwoman of the Secular Humanist Association. The committee suggested locating a monument at Nisseberget (a rock in the Royal Park, Oslo). But that would be on very same spot where a Nazi-monument (Snorre stone) was erected in 1941 during the German occupation (1940-45). The reasoning for suggesting this place was that the monument had to be erected on a life stance neutral place and not outside the Cathedral. But the public debate became strong since the German occupation still is a key to understand Norwegian identity and modern history. That is probably the reason why the Government dropped the idea. What the general public think was demonstrated in connection with national day of remembrance. They started to lay down flowers outside the Cathedral.

Church of Norway is in a process of transition from being an old National Church to get a looser relation to the state. This process will take time, but the Church shall remain a Lutheran Folk church, although it is a bit unclear what that implies. Probably it expresses a wish for continuity with the church from the Age of Reformation. The new text of the constitution wishes to promote the importance of human rights, which also implies some problems. Further the changes have created a power vacuum in the Church that different groups try to fill. This shows how the Church is split between pietistic inspired traditionalism and modernizing liberalism. Like in other churches the present controversy revolves around views and attitudes towards homosexuality and same-sex-marriages.

In spite of pluralisation, secularisation and church elites which often are distanced from people, the Church seem to have a surprisingly strong position; not on the institutional and central level, but on individual and decentralized levels. Especially enjoys the diaconal work much respect and sympathy. The church

rituals stand strong no matter that some politicians try to introduce secular rituals and promote life stance neutrality. A greater threat may come from the Church itself, from the several revisions that have been started the last years. The new translation of the Bible has been a success, but if rituals, liturgy and hymns are changed in a way that people do not recognize or relate to, they may make the Church irrelevant to people.