

By Anne Stensvold, professor, History of Religions, University of Oslo, Norway

Paper delivered at the “Religious pluralism Conference”, Kotor, 22.-24. March 2004

From monopoly to pluralism - Norwegian state religion in the modern era

In my paper I shall tell you the story about the last 190 years of religious development in Norway. The reason why I talk about 190 years, and not 200, is that if we count back 190 years from now, we arrive at the year 1814. That’s when Norway got its democratic constitution and was declared a mono-religious state: Paragraph 2 of the constitution says that “the Lutheran-Evangelical faith is the religion of the state”. This paragraph still stands - Norway has still an official state religion - but nevertheless, the religious situation in Norway today may fairly be described as a religious pluralism. The situation may thus be described somewhat paradoxically as “religious pluralism within the framework of a state religion”.

The question that informs my paper is the following: what are the preconditions for religious pluralism? I cannot give a general answer to this question but I can show you how religious pluralism in Norway came about. For me religious pluralism (i.e. the peaceful and respectful cohabitation of religious institutions) is an integrate part of a modern democratic state. In fact, I will argue that religious pluralism should be treated as an ideal; a state of affairs where the UN charter of human rights, in particular the article about religious freedom is respected, both in the legal system and in daily life. I venture to claim that this description suits the current religious situation in Norway. In this paper I wish to convey to you how this state of religious pluralism is the “natural” outcome of particular (fortunate) historical circumstances - and show you that the driving forces behind this development are both religious and political, but how religious pluralism would be unthinkable without political (secular) initiatives.

I suppose that none of you know very much about religion in Norwegian or about the country’s history for that matter. Why should you? Norway has been a remote and peaceful corner of Europe for about one thousand years and has not drawn much attention to itself. Probably you’re not particularly interested in Norwegian religion *per se*. When I decided to open this conference by giving a paper on religion in Norway, it’s because I believe that it may put the situation in the Balkans in an unusual, and hopefully interesting perspective - and to give you a glimpse of where we come from.

The beginning: the king's religion

The year 1030 is officially recognized as the year in which Norway became a Christian country: A Christian king, later known as Saint Olav, won the final battle against smaller independent kings and replaced Old Norse religion with Catholicism. The population which converted to Christianity consisted of only one, ethnic group - Norwegians - with their own Scandinavian dialect and costumes. After their conversion, Christianity became part and parcel with Norwegian tradition.

In fact there was only one other ethnic group in the country, the Laps - nomads who lived in the far north in an area covering northern parts of Russia-Finland-Sweden and Norway. Until the 17th century they were left alone with their own Finnish language and their own Shamanistic religion. From then onwards, missionaries arrived among the Laps and they were gradually integrated into their respective state churches, and also became part of mainstream culture - albeit with more difficulty.

For 500 years Norway was part of the Roman Catholic Church - until 1536 when the king adopted Protestantism and forced his people to follow suit. Catholic costumes such as the cult of saints, relics and devotion to the Virgin Mary were banned, all monasteries were closed and priests as well as nuns and monks were forced to marry. However, the new Christian faith was widely accepted and no popular insurgences are known.

From 1030 till the 1850ies Norway remained a uniquely mono-religious society as no other religion than the king's own was allowed in the country. Heresy was fiercely suppressed, neither Jews nor Muslims were allowed to enter the kingdom, nor were other forms of Christianity allowed within its borders. This fierce state of religious monopoly lasted until the 1850ies when a new, democratic constitution began to make itself felt, and the king's religious monopoly was dismantled and religious pluralism was gradually introduced.

The middle: Democracy: the dismantling of religious monopoly

As mentioned at the start, I see religious pluralism - the peaceful and respectful cohabitation of religious institutions - as an integrate part of democracy and the development of the modern state. Historically, the contrast between Norway and the Balkans is striking in more than one sense: peace/wars of conquest, cultural isolation/foreign invasions, mono-ethnic/ethnic plurality, monoreligious/multi-religious, social democracy/communism.

Unlike the Balkans nobody ever bothered to conquer Norway. In fact one may safely say that Norway is and has been one of the most peaceful countries in the world. However, like the Balkan countries today, Norway hasn't always been an independent country: for more than 500 years it was subject to foreign rule - but unlike the Balkans, this was more the result of undramatic circumstances and not the result of conquest: When the country came under Danish rule in the 14th century it was the result of marriage between Scandinavian kings and queens. Anyway, this was hundreds of years before nationalism, and none seems to have cared much about the fact that Norway was a province run from the king's court in Copenhagen. When Norway joined Sweden in a union in 1814, it was in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars. The union implied that Norway was recognized as a political unit - a country in its own right. The union implied that the country was given complete independence in internal matters, but foreign affairs were run by the Swedes. With hindsight, the union may be described as a transition period leading up to a peaceful independence in 1905.

The year 1814 symbolizes the birth of the modern Norwegian state. This was the year the union with Sweden was established, but more importantly, 1814 was the year that the country got its first democratic constitution. And although 1905 is the year when the country got its final status as an independent nation state, in Norwegian historical memory this year is generally regarded as less important than 1814; the year that democracy was introduced. Seen from a Balkan angle, this may seem rather strange, but two points may clarify the matter: Firstly, the transition was peaceful and thus didn't leave any lasting impressions on public memory (thanks to Sweden's acceptance of the Norwegian claim), and secondly, the shift did not entail any significant social change (except that the country got its own king - a king stripped of political power - rather as a natural symbol for the country's independent status).

Throughout the 19th century, democratic institutions developed hand-in-hand with modernity and industrialization, and the same development continued without disruption after 1905.¹ This development the country underwent from 1814 onwards was in fact very dramatic; a transition from a pre-modern to a democratic, modern nation state, but took place in a strikingly undramatic fashion of gradual development based on popular consensus. Unlike other European counties - notably Catholic countries (France being the prime example) -

¹ In 1835, 85% of the population were peasants and fishermen (1, 5 million), in year 1900 the number was reduced to 65% (2 million) and today the percentage is reduced to 10%, while 75% of the 4, 5 million total populations live in urban centres.

where democracy was introduced through revolutions and the Catholic church mustered strong support for its campaigns against political democracy, Norway's democratic development was uneventful. Except for a failed attempt by the state church to stop the introduction of parliamentarism in the 1880ies, (which failed due to a lack of support from other layers of society), undemocratic forces were scarce.

The strikingly peaceful development of democracy in Norway may be explained by certain fortunate historical circumstances: Firstly, Norway was an exceptionally homogenous society: there was so-to-speak equal distribution of wealth (or poverty, if you like) with hardly any nobility to talk of (the entire institution was abolished in the constitution of 1814) and no serfs. The population consisted largely of more or less independent farmers and fishermen plus a small bourgeoisie and a civil servants among which the state church priests constituting the largest group.

Secondly, the Norwegian population was literate when democracy was introduced. Already in 1739 a general school system established, securing reading and writing abilities for the entire population. In this connection, religion was of paramount importance: the school system was in fact established with a religious goal: to secure that the everybody - both male and female, high and low, should be able to read and to understand the Bible on their own. In 1860 the system was developed into modern schools with subjects such as history and physics. From then on, the general access to secular education allowed for a gradual dismantling of the (already weak) class system and the establishment of the flexible system characteristic of a modern society where status is acquired through personal achievement and not allotted by birth.

Thirdly, and perhaps more interestingly in the present context, Norway was a monocultural and mono-religious society. Thus democratization and the development of a modern society took place in an almost homogenous population - both where ethnicity and religion were concerned: Norway was (and still remains) one of the most mono-cultural, mono-ethnic, mono-linguistic countries in the world. Today, ethnic Norwegians constitute 95% of the total population. The remaining 5% consist of two groups: skilled workers from European countries (2, 5%) and from the beginning of the 1970ies, an increasing number of immigrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers - mostly from Asia, the Middle East and Africa. Whereas the first group consists of persons from Christian countries, the second group consists largely of Muslims (90%). This group which has established itself in Norway during

the past 30 years constitute between 2-3 % of the population, but most of them live in Oslo and surrounding areas, where in certain parts of the city they constitute about 20% of the population, and in certain schools up to 90% of the pupils.

The end: ethnic, cultural and religious diversity: immigration 1970 -

Despite the fact that the past 30 years of immigration represents a dramatic change in Norwegian society, both where ethnic roots and religious affiliation are concerned, they seem to settle in relatively peacefully. This is not because ethnic Norwegians are exceptionally tolerant or intrinsically good, but because there is a strong allegiance to modernity, democracy and humanism both among politicians and the general population. To put it briefly, Norwegian core values today, are the ones that are stated in the UN's charter for human rights. If it is possible to talk of 'taboos' in a modern society, it must be this: violation of human rights. They are considered the absolute good and are not to be discussed nor tampered with. Freedom of religion is one such value, which is safeguarded behind a wall of taboo. Respect for other religions was already a core value before the immigrants arrived.

In politics, art and mass media, the minority hardly makes itself felt - either nationally or in the Oslo area. Hence on the surface, Norway remains a strikingly homogenous society. In view of the significant number of immigrants in certain regions, however, this "harmony" may mean one of two things: either the new groups have embraced Norwegian basic values (e.g. the state school system which is constitutionally grounded in Christianity, political party system which spans from Evangelical Christian part (conservative) to right wing opportunists and a moderate leftist, secular Workers' party), *or* the state of harmony is an illusion, concealing the fact that one group (the ethnic majority) is still so dominant that it may effectively suppresses the challenges and critique from minority groups. I believe that both explanations have some merit: Norway was founded as a mono-ethnic society with a state monopoly on religion almost a thousand years ago. Hence in the historical sense, Norway is undeniably a Christian country.²

The glamorous picture of social harmony and high ethical standards, which I have depicted for you, is of course only partly true - a picture veiled in transparent pink. In everyday life, Norwegian society is not permeated by tolerance, equality and respect for others. Although

² The fact that 91% of the ethnic Norwegian population today are members of the state church, despite the possibility to disclaim such membership, points to a strong tradition. As a state institution, the church has flourished under political control.

theory may not always be reflected in actual practice, there is a general consensus about these ideals - a general condemnation of violence as a means in any situation.³

Tolerance, equality and respect are values, and must be learnt again and again through experience and critical discussion. Common sense tells us that it is necessary that each individual learn these values through personal experience. On the practical day-to-day level, the transmittance and maintenance of values takes place within the family and values are transmitted from the older to the younger generation. On the social level, the school system plays a key role, and on the level of the state, we must look at the laws in order to understand the underlying values of a society. Laws express society's dominant values. In a democratic society, the laws, ideally speaking, reflect common values. In pre-modern society they express those of the king and the ruling strata. In either case, they provide the framework within which social processes take place. In order to paint a picture of the last 200 years of religious development in Norway, I shall therefore focus on laws.

Laws on religion

In 1845 a new law was introduced, which allowed other Christian churches than the state church to establish in Norway. The Roman Catholic Church immediately established a branch, and so did the Methodists, Baptists and Mormons - but with much less success. Six years later, in 1851, an exception was made for a non-Christian religion: Judaism. In the constitution of 1814, Jews were not allowed to settle in the country. In 1851, this law was abolished and Jews were allowed to become citizens and to practice their religion. However, they never amounted to more than 00, 2% of the population. So it is fair to say that Norway remained a mono-religious Protestant country until the 1970ies when Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu immigrants brought their own respective religions.

Throughout the 20th century, the political parties in power have, without exception, used the state church as a political tool and used it as a reservoir and transmitter of a set of (Norwegian) ideals, values and worldview. So far, this has been a surprisingly fertile collaboration for both. Church leaders have willingly supported state legislation (a law on free abortion passed in 1975, being almost the only exception which comes to mind), and politicians have been careful not to interfere openly with church debates. Hence the state

³ Unlike legislation concerning murder in other countries, notably in South Europe, murder committed by a jealousy husband was never treated as a special category and did not constitute an excuse neither in the pre-modern or the modern Norwegian legal system.

church may be described as a fruitful collaboration between secular and religious interests. The main reason why the relationship has suffered relatively few setbacks - one such occasion was in 1961 when conservative priests tried to forge a separation between church and state after the labour government pushed through the appointment of a *female* priest - is that the social teachings and values of the state church have been in accordance with dominant political ideals. Thus for instance the state church eagerly supported the Declaration of Human Rights (1948), and has engaged actively in connection with the governments' foreign policy, particularly aid programs and peace diplomacy.

Throughout the 20th century, the Norwegian state church has maintained its privileged position till this day. As in pre-modern times it has continued to serve as an underpinning of the political system: the only official institution singularly concerned with forging the population's values and ideas into a single, Christian fold. However, a religion which is provided with a privileged status as a *state* religion signifies that it be placed under political control and serving a double purpose: politically it serves to legitimize the state, and from the religious point of view, the privileged position helps to fulfil its own purpose; to turn the population into a Christian congregation.

Religious pluralism

Hence religious pluralism in Norway is of a recent date: First arrived other Christian churches (1850ies), and then arrived the immigrants bringing with them their own religious traditions (1970-ies). All along, conservatives have expressed fear and frustration in the face of such difference condemning "strange behaviour, fanaticism. In connection with the new immigrant population Norwegians reacted against their bad-smelling food, strange cloths, language problems, and religions. However, in Norway, the consensus about such values as tolerance implies that it is effectively "forbidden" to express racist ideas (first and foremost instilled by the memory of Holocaust). However, anti-religious feelings, especially concerning Islam, are becoming more and more acceptable. Here, then, we see a real challenge to human right values! For the first time in modern Norway, values of tolerance and respect are put to the test. In Norway, people were quite unprepared for this sudden arrival of foreign religions. Until they arrived, there was one absolutely dominant religion in the country, namely the Lutheran state church.

In 1970 only 6% of the population did not belong to the official state church: 2% had no religion, and 4% belonged to other Christian churches. Today 91 % of ethnic Norwegians

remain members of the state church. Although the immigrants are relatively few - today they make up about 2, 5% of the population, they have made a major change in the religious landscape. Just to give you some more numbers: there are 1, 6% Muslims, and 0, 5% Buddhists, Hindus and Jews. With their different worldviews, morals and a strong group identity, they challenge the age-old hegemony of the state church.

Until the Protestant reformation in 16th century, Roman Catholicism was the state religion in Norway. But in 1536 the king converted to Protestantism and thus became head of both state and religion. Since then, Norway has been a Protestant country with the state religion dominating the landscape and religion permeating every part of the social sphere: hospitals and prisons still have Protestant priests on their payroll, religion is taught in both primary and secondary school, and all political parties except one miniscule communist party explicitly defines Protestantism as the backbone of Norwegian morals and worldview. In fact, I will argue that religion in Norway is such an integrated part of society that we are almost blind to its influence.

Today we have a Protestant priest as prime minister, a health minister who believes in healing through prayer - he is not popular - a minister of foreign aid who eagerly support fundamentalist Christian missions and assign to them the responsibility for aid-programs, plus a Christian minister in the ministry of oil and energy.

According to sociological surveys, Norway is supposedly a modern, secular society with one of the highest scores on the secularization scale: Only 10-15% go to church more than one to two times per year, 60% believe in God, 35% believe that Christ is the son of God, 7% believe in hell, and 15% believe in reincarnation. However, the fact remains that almost all these persons are members of the Lutheran state church. This massive unorthodoxy is not due to a lack of religious education. As mentioned earlier, religion is an obligatory subject in school, thus every Norwegian has at least 7 years of instruction in Lutheran dogma and tradition. Hence the population's unorthodox religious views must be explained in terms of personal choice rather than ignorance. In view of this, it would perhaps be better to say that rather than having a secular worldview, Norwegians have embraced the idea of freedom of religion understood as the individual's right to define his or her own personal faith and to decide his or her own moral standards. Thus surveys show striking disregard for Christian moral norms among the members of the state church: the divorce rate is 50%; more than 50% of all children are born outside wedlock. Nevertheless, almost 90% of the people in these

surveys are members of the state church. Thus we may safely say that normative Protestantism is in crisis, that the priests have lost their former authority and that somewhere along the route towards modernity, people took matters into their own hands.

This crisis of clerical authority started a long time ago, more precisely in 1843. That year, a new law was passed, which granted everybody - regardless of whether they had a formal training in theology or not, to preach religion. This law was passed after strong pressure from a group of lay people (haugianere). They were strongly influenced by pietism - a revival movement that preached the "religion of the heart": For them, true religion comes from the heart, and good moral conduct flows naturally from the religious heart. Being Lutherans, they also stressed that true religion is not dependent on priests and rituals, but is based on the personal relationship between the individual and God. For these laymen, religion was devotion rather than conviction; an affair of the heart and not dependent on religious education. For them it was not enough to be baptised, to go to church each Sunday and give all your money to the poor. To them, being a Christian meant to be "born again" to have had a religious peak experience - a conversion - often expressed in the phrase: "I have met Jesus" and "Jesus changed my life".⁴ Since lay persons may have a stronger personal relationship with God, pietism placed less importance on theological education. In Norwegian church history, the law of preaching which was introduced in 1843 can be seen as dismantling of priestly authority and a big step towards democratization of the state church.

Freedom of religion

Politically, Norway is an old democracy. Already in 1814 a democratic constitution was established. Politically, the constitution was radical for its times: it granted legislative power to a parliament and granted voting rights to almost 30% of the male population. But from the point of view of religion, the constitution was hardly democratic at all but continued the state monopoly on religion and simply continuing a tradition stemming from pre-modern times. Thus the king remained the head of the church, and the priests continued as state employees with equal social status to judges and government bureaucrats. In addition, membership in the state church was obligatory for all citizens.

⁴ Pentecostal Christianity, the fastest growing religion in the world today has its roots in this tradition. It started as a religious revival movement in USA at the turn of the last century. Unlike the pietists, they have a more crude understanding of conversion: Pentecostals seek visible and audible signs (speaking in tongues, shaking body) as testimony of conversion. The bodily signs are perceived as manifestations of the Holy Spirit, and rituals are conducted with the goal to exhibit these signs. Since the signs are understood to be caused by the Holy Spirit, the rituals usually contain an element of healing of the sick.

Membership in the State Church was mandatory for all citizens until 1845: Until that year there was no distinction between citizenship and church membership - between congregation and society: to be a Norwegian citizen meant to be a member of the Norwegian Lutheran Church. But after 1845 the two spheres were divided. The new law meant that people were no longer obliged to attend church on Sundays, nor to baptise their children in the state church and that people could resign their membership in the state church and sign up as member of other Christian churches.⁵ Throughout the period these churches included 5 % of the population as members. In order to secure its position there are special rules about membership, for instance Norwegian children are automatically registered as members of the state church - regardless of whether they are baptised in church or not - if one of the parents is a member.

The final leap towards freedom of religion took place more than a hundred years later in 1964. That year freedom of religion was included in the Norwegian constitution. From that year on, all religions were granted the right to establish congregations in Norway - as long as it is in accordance with “good morals”.

Unlike the religious laws passed in the 19th century, this law was introduced due to international pressure, notably the UN declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the European Declaration of Human Rights (1950). With the signing of these international laws, a process of adjustment of the country’s laws was started. Then finally, in 1969 a new law was passed, which regulated the relationship between religious communities and the state. Thus when immigrants of non-Christian faith started to arrive from the 1970ies and onwards, they had no formal difficulty in maintaining their religious tradition.

Religious pluralism and the state church

Throughout these legislations the state church retained its privileged position as the religious foundation of the Norwegian state. In practice, this meant that the state was (and still remains) obliged to relate its laws and its institutions to Protestant teachings. It states that Norway is a Christian country and hence all laws and all state activity shall in principle be guided by Christian values...However, the provision is mostly a “sleeping rule” except in the school system. In Norway, 98% of children attend state schools, which have are obliged to convey a Christian worldview and values. In 1997 religious education in state schools

⁵ During the 1850ies the Catholic Church and American Evangelical churches: Methodism, Baptism and Mormons established congregations in Norway. At the end of the century Jehovah’s Witnesses and Adventism were introduced, and in 1907, Pentecostalism.

underwent a radical reform: religion became an obligatory subject for everybody, regardless of religious affiliation, more hours were assigned to the subject in primary school, and the teachers were banned from conducting missionary activities. The curriculum was changed accordingly: 60 % Christianity, 30 % other religions and the remaining 10 % humanism and ethics. The underlying motivation was to ensure religious tolerance through knowledge: on the one hand it should provide all children with a profound knowledge of Christianity - "Norwegian religio-cultural heritage" - as well as give good knowledge of the minorities' religious traditions. The reform caused much debate and was criticized both by Christian groups (not enough Christianity) and by minorities (too much Christianity). However, in Parliament there was a massive consensus, and apart from the religious minorities - Christians as well as non-Christians and atheist groups - the reform was well received.

Such a positive attitude to religious education in state schools, may well come as a surprise to those who have sociological reports where Norway is rated as one of the most secularized countries in the modern world. However, the subject is explicitly not missionary in aim, it is a multi-religious education with emphasize on Protestantism, and hence is regarded as a useful means to secure common values.

In my view, this also reflects the strong position of the state church in Norway today. In fact I will argue that in most people's mind, it is viewed as part and parcel with the Norwegian state and hence as a promoter of Norwegian main stream values. The reason for this intermingling of religion and nation is historical: Since 1884 the state church has been under political control: It is in fact the parliament which decides everything - the church authorities only decides theological issues - dogma - and the correct performance of ritual. The rest is left to the politicians. I will argue that this political control over religion has ensured that the church has been (forcefully) included in the ongoing process of social change. For instance the change in women's role: It is due to women's liberation movement and subsequent political feminism that the state church allows female priests. The first woman was ordained in 1961. Today there are 2 women among the 10 bishops. All of them have been appointed by political vote against the will of the Church. Presently there is strong political pressure for allowing homosexual priests in the church, i.e. priests living in a stable relationship with a partner of their own sex. The question cuts across the Church divided in two camps. In 2002 the bishops have agreed to not make any firm decision on the matter. Among the general population there is an overwhelming support for the pro-homosexual stance. One of the female bishops has allowed one such priest in her district...

A neutral state in religious matters?

Thus Norwegian society may well be characterized as having a positive attitude to religion. Unlike France, religion isn't merely tolerated, but is regarded as a valuable part of society. Since the introduction of the law of religious freedom in 1969, this positive attitude has been extended to include the new foreign religions that have emerged in Norway over the past 30 years. Through religious laws they are granted a privileged status in their own right - they are simply not counted as part of civil society but placed over and above other types of organizations (workers unions, cultural groups, sports organizations, education).

The special status granted to religion is illustrated by the fact that religious organizations get much more money from the state than any other type of organization. In fact I will put it so strongly as to claim that the Norwegian state treats all religions as some sort of semi-state-institutions. However, this official recognition and economic support has its costs: In return for its support, the Norwegian state imposes the same organizational structure on to all religions.

This organizational structure is modelled on the Lutheran state church, thus forcing them to adjust to a structure of organization which is radically different from their own. For instance the law requires that religious leaders in Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism function as the state employed priests: he must have a theological education and he is legally responsible for the members' faith and religious practices. As a part of his stately duties he must present a budget and annual report to state authorities. But whereas regular state church priests report directly to the king via the Church ministry, the "priests" of foreign religions are placed one step below; leaders of religious groups report to the regional authorities. In return, the state gives economic support to allow the religions to conduct their activities (salary for the "priest" and his helpers, religious teachers, rent etc.) and grants them official right to conduct marriage rituals, burials etc. In short, the legal privileges of the state church are extended to all religions.

These legal provisions have strong public support: it is felt - not only among politicians but in the population at large, that it is fair that all religions be treated on equal terms. After all, the members are Norwegian citizens who pay taxes to the state; hence they have a right to demand something in return.

Minority religions

The strong position granted to religion in the Norwegian legal system has its roots in the pietistic movement of the 19th century which defined religion as essentially a private concern; a matter between the individual and God. It is largely thanks to their influence that freedom of religion was gradually introduced - despite the existence of an official state church. Thus since 1969 all religious organizations get economic support from the state according to the number of members. The religious laws are the combined result of internal pressure from Christian sects and the influence of international collaboration.

Compared to other organizations, the status of religious organizations in Norway may be described as privileged. This fits well with the prevailing idea of religion as a highly personal and important matter. This attitude is clearly seen from the way most state church members relate to their religion, namely in connection with private celebrations: matrimony, baptism and funerals - and their lack of participation in major church celebrations - except for Christmas Eve.

Today the majority's religion - the official state church - no longer functions as the one and only official religion, but merely the largest, most dominant religion in the land: the state has abolished its monopoly on religion and the state church now finds itself discreetly placed somewhere along the boarder between the official and the private sphere that ultimately only involves the individual and God. Thus we have come full circle: the first step towards dismantling the state's monopoly on religion was informed by this deeply Protestant idea of true religion. Most Norwegians today share the same idea.

A question of national and religious identity

The development of religious pluralism in Norway is the result of a triad of historical facts: firstly the Protestant idea of religion as a private matter, secondly the history of a state church and thirdly the modern welfare state. Together, these three factors have created a strange combination whereby religion is somehow seen as a private matter and as a state responsibility. It is felt that a welfare state should care for its citizens' basic needs, and religion is defined as one such need. I believe that these historical factors condition the future of religion in Norway and that religion will indeed remain a state affair regardless of whether the state church is abolished or not. The state will continue the system of economic support and official control of religion and the politicians will maintain a fair amount of influence on religious development and secure that religious fanaticism is not allowed to flourish.

I have already stated that ethnicity is an important identity factor: Stating your identity in ethnic or nationalistic terms may sound more or less like this: “I belong to *this* group of people - we - who are related (sic) to one another through blood relations; we (e.g. people living in Norway with ancestors in *this* territory), the ethnic group, are more or less “family””. I will argue that with the idea of blood relations and family we also find expectations of protection, respect and loyalty shaped on personal experiences in the family setting. In addition, ethnicity is conceived in terms of ownership to land (territory) - a land which sustains our physical needs. This simplistic idea about ethnicity constitutes the basis of the modern nation state. Hence it makes perfect sense in agrarian societies. The paradox is that it was articulated in modern times - when European societies developed from rural to urban-industrialized societies....The Balkans is not the only region permeated with nationalistic ideas, and also in Norway, nationalism has played a major role in creating a basis for resistance and violent protest - not recently, but during the 2. World War. From 1940-45

Norway was occupied by Nazi Germany. In everyday language the resistance against the occupants was expressed - not only through anti-nazism, but as hatred towards Germans.

But the war ended with the invaders defeat, and for many decades after the war the population's suffering during the occupation was a cherished memory, commemorated on every possible occasion and serving as a unifying factor with Nazism as the ideological enemy of modern, Norwegian society. Thus the Nazi occupation served to define Norwegian nationalism in ideological terms creating a much clearer cut image of what we are *not*: we are not racists, not hero-worshippers, not blindly following orders given by our superiors. Put differently: After the 2. world war Norwegian national identity was furnished with a set of ideal which conform nicely with those values which are formulated in the UN charter for Human rights: (we are) tolerant, free and responsible. Before the 2. World War, these same ideas were attached to specific political groups - after the war, they were integrated into the stock pile of taken for granted, self-evident common good.

Historically speaking, membership in a religious community - religious identity - is a far older identity factor than ethnicity and nationhood. Unlike the biological basis of ethnicity, religious belonging is a more abstract notion - a “community of values”. Stating your religious identity may sound something like this: “I am a Catholic and Catholics share certain basic values and ideas about what it means to be a human being, how God is perceived and

what the world should be like". Hence the religious community relies on a more abstract idea - here there are neither blood relations nor territory, but thoughts and ideas. However, religions usually solve this deficiency by using metaphorical language: we are God's children; God is our father, protector and helper, etc. Thus construing God as "our" patriarch, our common forefather. Unlike my own father in flesh and blood, God's powers are limitless, and his kingdom (i.e. territory) is so infinitely vast that it transcends the world (e.g. the territory controlled by the ethnic group). Thus religion taps into the primary element of human community - family - by redefining blood relationships in terms of an abstract father figure (god) who is more powerful than all human fathers put together. And as head of his spiritual family, God may accommodate all family members into his eternal, limitless and almighty heaven.

Needless to say, ethnicity and religion makes a powerful mix. In Norway, this combination is found in the state church: The Norwegian State church provides a religious suprastructure for an ethnic community - only Norwegian citizens can be members. Nevertheless, in the Norwegian setting, the intermingling of ethnicity and religion has not lead to hostility towards other races or religions. The reason is historical: when nationalism was at its peak in the years around 1800/1900 neither the state nor the religion was attacked from the outside. And when the Nazi occupation occurred from 1940-45, the occupants were Protestants like us....Hence in this respect, we have no experience what so ever of the mechanisms that come into play in a situation where not only "our" way of life (society and state) but also "our" religion is threatened. What would the leaders of the Norwegian state church say and do should "our" religion come under serious attack and risk being banned from Norwegian territory? It is not pleasant to ponder such questions - but it is necessary. Not because I expect a violent clash of religions in Norway in my lifetime, but because I believe that the absence of dramatic conflicts has conditioned us (Norwegians) to see only the benign side of both nationalism and religion, leaving us with the false idea that both are intrinsically good - and even conducive to peace. Thus our prime minister, who's also a Protestant priest, recently stated that religion *is* not a cause of conflict but a precondition for peace. However, the history of the Balkans shows us that indeed this is not the case.

Historically, Norway was created as a national state: the state of ethnic Norwegians. Today, the ethnic Norwegians still make up 95% of the population, but the minorities are bound to become bigger (birth rates, continuous immigration), and intermarriage between ethnic groups are flourishing. Even with a minority of only 5% immigrants, Norway is not an ethnic

state anymore - the former correspondence between ethnic group and state applies no more. Although Asian and African immigration is only 30 years old in Norway, the new situation of the multiculturalism has already placed Norwegian nationalism under pressure. The immigrants are here to stay, and Norway is no longer a mono-ethnic mono-religious society. It is also becoming more and clearer to everybody that the nationalism that formed the Norwegian state no longer functions as a unifying force. Multi-ethnicity calls for a redefinition of what it means to be Norwegian. My "solution" is a reconsideration of the concepts of society and state - a dismantling of its nationalistic past and reconsideration of what it means to be a society.

In the mono-ethnic and nationalistic Norway of yesterday, loyalty to the state was inherent in the idea of the nation and symbolically represented by the king who was (and still remains!) the head of state and the official state religion. In multiethnic Norway today, loyalty to the state must be built on something else. What? How can we create a "we" which is not based on ethnicity? The answer to this question is as simple as it is vague: a common belief - not in the same religion - but in political democracy, human decency and equal rights as well as equal obligations to society and towards each other. I believe that commitment to values such as these creates the necessary preconditions for religious pluralism. However, I would like to ask you to take note of the fact that these values may not be designated as religious ones - although they do conform to the major religious traditions and the moral teachings of their institutions.