



THE COUNCIL FOR RELIGIOUS
AND LIFE STANCE COMMUNITIES

The Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities in Norway (STL)

1. Introduction

The Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities in Norway (STL) is an advocate vis-à-vis Norwegian society and political institutions on issues of religious and life stance pluralism, freedom and equal treatment.

The Council, established in 1996, is an umbrella organization bringing together sixteen religious and life stance communities:

- The Bahá'í Community of Norway
- The Buddhist Community of Norway
- The Catholic Church in Norway
- The Christian Community
- The Christian Council of Norway
- The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons)
- The Church of Norway (Lutheran)
- Gurwara Sri Nanak Dev Ji (Sikh)
- The Holistic Association
- The Jewish Communities in Norway
- The Norwegian Humanist Association
- The Norwegian Hindu Culture Centre
- Sanatan Mandir Sabha, Norway (Hindu)
- The Muslim Dialogue Network
- Ahmadiyya Muslim Yamaat Norway

Local councils for religious and life stance communities are established in seven towns.

Within the European context, the Council has a unique profile for several reasons. The first one is that the Council is a cooperation among both religious and secular instances (the Norwegian Humanist Association is a particularly active member). The second one is that the Council provides an arena where members, both majority (The Church of Norway) and minority communities, have been able to define and pursue common political goals such as equal treatment of religious and life stance communities.

The Council further facilitates regular meetings of senior religious leaders. The level of mutual knowledge, trust and cooperation established within and supported by the Council, has proved to be an effective tool to address sensitive issues in the field of religious pluralism and has worked as a tool for conflict prevention in Norway among religious and life stance communities.

2. Goals

The main goals of the work of the Council are two: to promote equal treatment of religious and life stance communities in Norway, and to promote respect and understanding among religious and life stance communities. In other words, religious and life stance politics as well as dialogue. Religious politics for the Council is both a matter of principles and of practical engagement. The principles leading such political engagement are international human rights, particularly those

related to protection from discrimination and freedom of religion and belief. The work for protection from discrimination and affirmation of freedom of religion and belief has in the recent past focused on the areas of education (kindergarten, school, university), work place, health institutions (hospitals and homes for the elderly), detention centres, the military and graveyards. Large conferences on chaplaincy are held biannually.

3. The principle of consensus

In its decision making processes, the Council employs the principle of consensus: the opinion of each of the members has the same weight independently of the size of each member community. The principle of consensus makes the Council and its pronouncements fully representative of its membership, both internally and vis-à-vis society at large and political institutions. In the spirit of consensus, regular meetings are held among the members of the Council to discuss issues of common interest.

The Council can make pronouncements even if not all members agree. In this case, it is made explicit which religious or life stance communities do not support a specific opinion. For example, the Norwegian Humanist Association takes the distance from practices of circumcision.

4. The Council as a dialogue partner for political actors and research institutions

At the level of Norwegian institutions, religion and life stance is the competence of the Ministry of Culture. The Ministry is in regular contact with the Council for exchange of information and for advice. The Council holds first-hand knowledge on the challenges the different religious and life stance communities face and the practical solutions that are found at the local level. In this respect, the Council is an important dialogue partner for the Ministry.

Council's representatives sit in political commissions such as one established by the Ministry of Education and the Commission against religious and life stance discrimination. The Council also works in close partnership with research institutions.

At times, the Council advises the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI), for example on issues of residence permits for religious leaders coming from abroad. In general, the Council is seen by Norwegian authorities as a trustworthy and most competent instance at the national level, on issues of faith and life stance pluralism.

5. A new law on religion and life stance

500 years of a State-Church system are coming to an end, and for this reason, Norway needs to review its legislation. In the year 2017, the draft of a new law on religion and life stance was made public for discussion and comments. The Council has played a crucial role as discussion partner for the Ministry of Culture, as promoter of debates and formal contributions to the proposed law among religious and life stance communities in Norway as well as among relevant social actors such as the Norwegian Center for Human Rights.

6. Comprehensive religious and life stance politics

The main political goal for the Council is to define a comprehensive political program that guarantees equal treatment of religious and life stance communities in Norway. 'Comprehensive' is understood in several ways. First of all, a 'comprehensive' political program aims at guaranteeing the equal treatment of all religious and life stance communities. Secondly, a 'comprehensive' program envisions coordinated efforts among several Ministries (Culture,

Education, Justice, etc.). Thirdly, a ‘comprehensive’ religious and life stance political program aims at seeing religion and life stance as integral components of each person’s life “from the cradle to the grave”, in each phase and aspect of people’s life (school, work place, voluntary organizations, hospital, the graveyard, etc.). A comprehensive religious and life stance political program points to the equal status of religious and life stance communities in Norway and calls on the State to implement laws and regulations that guarantee equal treatment.

7. Religion and integration

In public debates, the religious identity of minorities, particularly of recent immigrants, is often referred to as an obstacle to processes of integration. The Council, on its part, recognizes the importance of religion and life stance particularly in the life of immigrants, and their need to be integrated in the Norwegian society with their religion and life stance. The Council also recognize the importance of religious and life stance communities as providers of social support to immigrants. While issues of religious politics tend to overlap with issues of integration, the Council choses to hold the two areas separated to highlight that religion and life stance are to be seen by political actors as more than a tool for integration.

8. Engagement on ethical issues

The Council aims at being a responsible actor in society and at promoting active social and political participation among its members. The Council is currently engaged on a number of ethical themes such as environmental issues (for example the Interreligious Rainforest Initiative), issues of biotechnology (particularly in the area of reproductive health), aid, battles for gender equality and the issue of sexual harassment within religious communities, and the rights of refugees. With its public profile, the Council aims at underlining the importance of the religious and life stance aspects of current debates.

9. Funding

The primary source of funding for the Council is the Ministry of Culture. Other sources are the Ministry of Climate and Environment, member organizations, and Foundations (such as Fritt Ord).

10. Structure

A council of members is the highest decision making organ and meets five times a year. The board, elected by the council of members, meets monthly. The staff of the Council is currently composed of four people.