

STLs Gjestebud 2017

9. oktober 2017

Remarks by: Ingrid Rosendorf Joys, STL's general secretary

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends

Thank you to professor Jonathan Fox for his rich speech. Thank you also to professor Torkel Brekke and Asle Toje for their remarks.

Some of the big questions are necessarily triggered by these presentations. I will mention some of them and will continue being concrete with some thoughts regarding our new law proposal.

- How close should the connection between the state and the religion be? For religion to maintain independence and for the state to be for all? Is it always a bad thing to mix the two?
- Can a state within the Human Rights paradigm keep one preferred religious tradition – as has been/is the case in Norway?
- How can we deal with the scepticism towards religion or even fear for religion?
- How do we cope with immigration and religious belief?
- Where can we place Norway – with its new law on religion and lifestance?

So let us shift to the suggested new law on Religious and Life Stance communities.

The Ministry of Culture issued the suggested law less than two weeks ago and has invited all of us to respond. The deadline for responses to the new law is 31 December this year.

The law itself is rather short but the consultation paper following the proposed law is rich and thorough. The part that has been discussed the most and will be discussed the most has to do with funding. The Council of Religious and Lifestance Communities (STL) welcomes this proposed law. Norway has become a pluralistic society gathering people from all over the world with different religious beliefs and life stance views. The part of the population not belonging to the Norwegian Church grows, approx. 15 percent of the population are member of another religious or lifestance community and approx. 15 percent are not member anywhere. And as we all know the Norwegians Church took a large step towards separation from the State 1. January this year when it became a legal entity.

On this background the proposed law offers a comprehensive perspective on the religious and lifestance field both looking at the past and also pointing to the future. STL will in its Council meeting on Wednesday discuss the law proposal for the first time. We have of course discussed many of the elements reflected in the law proposal and I will now offer some of these thoughts.

First and foremost, we are happy that the law proposal is written in a positive tone dealing with religion and lifestance.

Religious and Lifestance communities are important institutions in our society. They offer spaces for ethical reflection and provide their members a frame for their identity. Some of them organise after school activities, women groups, meeting for the elders, Norwegian courses etc. These are offered to the population at large and not limited to the members. For immigrants the religious community can be an important bridge between their society of origin and their new country.

In the Norwegian or Nordic model, we tend to fund fields we think should be offered to everybody regardless of the size of their wallet. Sport is such an area. Culture is another. Why not religion? There are far more people going to Church or another house of worship during a weekend than people going to a football league match or going to the opera.

The new law acknowledges this. It states that Norway of course is obliged by Human Rights, especially the European Convention on Human Rights, article 9, and the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights article 18. In addition to this the Norwegian Constitution secures an active supportive policy towards religion and lifestance. Also the funding is secured in the Constitution and the equal treatment of the religious and lifestance communities.

So, the overall picture is a positive one. Nevertheless there are in the law proposal some sections that are more controversial. I will briefly mention them:

To be registered as a religious or lifestance community the community has to have at least 500 members above the age of 15. This implicates that of the 783 communities that received funding from the government in 2016 only 123 will if the new law passes. Perhaps I should mention that it would be possible to bring together communities in an umbrella organisation to exceed the 500 members limit.

The funding of religious and lifestance communities outside the Norwegian Church will continue to be a compensation for the money spend on the Norwegian Church, and the funding for religious and lifestance communities outside the Norwegian Church would be calculated per head but the funding to the Norwegian Church would not.

Another controversy is where the money should come from. Should it be divided – as it is today – between the state and the municipalities or should the state handle all the funding? In the proposal it is suggested that the state takes over the funding of the religious and lifestance communities outside the Norwegian Church. As for the funding of the Norwegian Church the law offers both solutions: funding from both the state and the municipality or solely from the state. It is however important to mention that either way the overall budget will remain the same.

Yet another controversy will be on the management of the Graveyards. Most of the evaluations up to now have pointed to the municipalities as reasonable managers of the Graveyards. In this law it is suggested that they remain as a task for the Norwegian Church to handle.

As a follow up on the discussion on the management of the graveyards would be the discussion on which tasks the Norwegian Church conduct for the society as a whole. Funding for these tasks – as the management of the graveyards – would be kept out of the total sum transferred to

the Norwegian Church and thus used as base for the transfers to the other religious and lifestance communities. More controversial would perhaps be the transfer regarding “the special position” the Norwegian Church holds.

The terms for receiving funds from the state will also be debated. In the proposal the terms are more clear and also more comprehensive than in the current law. The point underscoring that religious and lifestance communities have to follow Norwegian Law may be uncontroversial, but loosing funding do to moral parameters is. What is an unhealthy environment for children, for instance? Also abroad funding is on the table – religious communities cannot receive funds from states who don't respect the freedom of religion and belief.

When it comes to gender equality, the ministry suggests carrot rather than stick and will not demand 40 percent representation in governing boards as has been discussed this spring.

I believe that all the above and more will be discussed the following months. In STL there will be (I guess) agreement in some of these areas and disagreement in others. We welcome the debate and believe that building a society of disagreement is the way forward in our pluralistic world. Recognising that we are different also when it comes to values reminds us that we should not formulate a law which is so narrow that only the mainstream beliefs or norms are excepted. We should make sure that we in our wish to support liberal ideals don't end up with a law that is illiberal in its consequences. We should make sure we don't end up with a law securing the majority funding on behalf of the minorities.

STL has earlier communicated that the new law should point to the future. It should be based on the recognition of the religious and lifestance communities as important institutions in the society. And that the law should be based on the principle of equal treatment of the religious and lifestance communities. After a first reading of the proposal from the Ministry of Culture, we can conclude that this is to a large extent the case, and of course we will in the following point to the parts where we believe there could be better solutions in the final law.

Thank you very much for the attention.