

Address, U.S Embassy Oslo and Skaperkraft, April 24th 2018 from 8:30 to 10:00

How new legislation impacts religious communities - Is faith a key pillar of the modern society?

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Your excellences, ladies and gentlemen, good morning!

Thank you very much for the invitation. As was said in the introduction, I am the General Secretary of the Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities, STL. STL has for more than twenty years brought together religious and life stance communities in Norway for dialogue and political work for equal treatment.

The question at hand is: is faith a key pillar of the modern society? The short answer is – yes; one of many. Faith and religion, or religion and life stance (life stance being, the worldview of the humanists, the non-believers) is part of civil society. Religion is important to people and should find its natural place within the society. Religious and life stance communities should be supported as other important part of our civil society are. The secularity of the state does not prevent the government from providing financial or other forms of support to religious and life stance communities, as long as this happens in a framework defined by transparent, inclusive and egalitarian criteria. Within the Norwegian model we fund common goods, public goods so that everyone should be able to take part regardless of the size of their wallet. Religion is such a public good.

How does the new legislation impact the religious communities? Is the framework defined by transparent, inclusive and egalitarian criteria?

First, let me draw a short backdrop before answering more concrete.

On the global scene, we experience states to impose restrictions on religion and life stance. Minorities are under threat, and nationality, religion and identity politics are closely connected. Freedom decreases and politics is increasingly illiberal. In Norway, we have for decades chosen a different path. When we now face a new reality with the shift from having a state church to one that is independent of the state and with an ever more religiously diverse society, we are about to stumble at the starting block. The consultation document accompanying the bill initiated by the Ministry of Culture underlines that one of the aims of the new law is increased equal treatment. This is good news, but it does not reflect the proposed law; the proposed law is a step away from equal treatment.

Why equal treatment? The easy answer is that the Norwegian Constitution says so. It says that the Church of Norway remains the people's church and should be funded by the state, and that all religious and life stance communities should be treated equally. In addition to this, equal treatment is wise, it is according to human rights and it is sustainable. The same arguments can be

used when we warn against illiberal politics. We cannot prohibit things, practices, simply because we do not like them.

Let me state that STL – bringing together religious and life stance communities including the Church of Norway, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Baha'is, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and Humanists – acknowledges that the Church of Norway holds a special position in Norwegian society; historically, size-wise and culturally. This does not challenge the principle of equal treatment. The special position should find its place within the frame of equal treatment.

STL has commented on various aspects on the proposed law, I will mention but a few.

The draft law proposes that a religious or life stance community should consist of at least 500 members from the age of 15 in order to be registered. We find this number too high. We understand that 1 or 2 is few and suggest that the number is around 100. Modern technology should make it easy to register.

The law proposes that children under the age of 15 should not be counted as members. STL disagree and underscores that children have their own right to belonging to a religious community as equal members.

STL (minus the Church of Norway) prefers that the funding is centralised and that the local funding (the funding from the municipalities) ends. The Church of Norway decided at their general assembly last week that they prefer (with a rather large minority voting against) that the funding should remain both central from the government and local from the municipalities.

STL including the Church of Norway underlines equal treatment as a core principle. When it comes to practical terms the Church of Norway and the minorities sometimes have different views. One said, and I quote: *After decades of working together to secure equality, we find ourselves in a situation best described as sitting in the same boat but rowing in each directions.* End of quote.

This implies that some of the balancing between special position and equal treatment varies. After the religious and life stance communities together and alone have considered the proposed law, including the Church of Norway's general assembly, I think it is fair to say, that the disagreements are most challenging around the following two subjects, and I will end by mentioning them briefly:

- 1) Counting of members. The religious and life stance communities outside the Church of Norway should all count their members as has been the custom for years, but with the new law, The Church of Norway shall not. The Church of Norway support this – the rest of us do not, and we say: If people count (and it is about the people, their Human Rights, their taxes), count the people!
- 2) How should we balance special position and equal treatment? Most of the religious communities emphasise that even though the position is special, the treatment should be equal. If you have one stronger part and one or many weaker, there could be reasons to treat them differently. But the reason to treat them differently is to make the weaker stronger, not to make the stronger even stronger. All religious and life stance

communities have special needs – the smaller lack the benefits of being big. Most of the religious and life stance communities within the STL-umbrella are spread all over Norway – including the Church of Norway. Why should only the Church of Norway have special treatment for being nationwide? A catholic needs to be buried on Finnmarksvidden, and a Jew needs religious serving in Alta. The Church of Norway is nationwide, but so are the larger part of the rest of us. We say: all are different but we all have the same religious needs and the same human rights, and that is what counts.

Thank you very much for the attention.