

CHAPTER 35

THE EMERGENCE OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE: THE NORWEGIAN EXPERIENCE

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I. INTRODUCTION

Norway, a small country of 4.5 million inhabitants in the northernmost corner of Europe, has enjoyed constitutional, democratic government since 1814, except for five years of Nazi-German rule from 1940 to 1945. But only during the last thirty-five years or so has Norway also become a wealthy country, thanks in large part to the discovery and exploitation of oil and gas in the North Sea.

During the same period, Norway has received an unprecedented flow of immigrants from many countries, continents, and cultural backgrounds. Norway has become manifestly multicultural and multireligious. The new challenges and uncertainties have given rise to difficulties and conflicts, but have also inspired new ideas, generated cross-cultural solidarities, and, in particular, triggered interreligious dialogue and understanding.

The authors of the present chapter know from personal and “institutional” dialogue experience that representatives from different belief communities can engage in constructive conversation and sustained cooperation about matters of common concern, for example about moral, educational, legislative, social, and interethnic issues in the larger society. We consider communication, interaction, and partnership between differing confessions to be an increasingly important dimension of the exercise of our freedom of religion or belief.

This chapter gives an account of Norwegian experience with interfaith dialogue and interfaith cooperation during the last fifteen years. It reports on a number of serious and extensive dialogue projects, as well as other cooperative undertakings, across the barriers that separate different religious and “life stance” (or “worldview”) communities in Norway.

For background, we begin with a sketch of Norway’s long tradition as a culturally homogeneous and a religiously monolithic Christian state.

II. THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

For a period of one thousand years Norway has been a kingdom with a Christian “state church.” When Christianity was introduced, rather violently, a thousand years ago, the law of the land soon laid down that “every man shall be a Christian in the Realm of Norway” (The Frostating Code). Being a Norwegian *implied* being also a Christian. Royal power and church power were always intimately related, though the balance of power would shift back and forth between royal and church dominance.

When the Lutheran Reformation was introduced in Norway, by royal decree of our then Danish king in 1536, the bond between state and church was further intensified. During the eighteenth century political control of religion and religious life became absolutist. Appointments and dismissals of bishops and priests, control of church doctrine and church property, the development of church liturgy, and the organization of popular religious education were all matters decided by the sovereign—and more or less benign—king and his administration. Two cases in point:

1739: Elementary schooling for all Norwegian children became mandatory, so that all Norwegians should be able to read the Bible and the Lutheran Catechism firsthand. For more than one hundred years, knowledge of catechism plus Bible and basic literacy were the only mandatory school subjects for all the king’s subjects.

1741: A law was passed proscribing any religious gathering of people that was not permitted by officials of the Church of Norway and was not conducted in line with Church of Norway doctrine and liturgical rules (“Konventikkelplakaten”). Two generations later this law was to become infamous when it was applied, with cruelty and devastating effects, to curb and imprison for ten years the greatest Christian teacher and preacher in the history of Norway, Hans Nielsen Hauge.

In 1814 Norway got a short lease of national independence, as a side effect of the Napoleonic Wars. Before being forced to form a union with Sweden, Norwegians made use of the window of opportunity to create their own constitution, which is by now the oldest constitution in Europe. In 1814 it was also the most liberal, the most egalitarian, and the most democratic constitution in all of Europe. But, with respect to freedom of religion and interreligious understanding, Norwegians did admittedly establish what was religiously a near-totalitarian state. It appeared self-evident to Norway’s constitutional Founding Fathers that in independent Norway the Evangelical-Lutheran Church should carry on as the public religion of the state, just as earlier under the Danish-Norwegian king. At Norway’s constitutional convention in 1814 a weak provision of religious freedom was proposed, only to be dropped—or forgotten. Instead, paragraph 2 of Norway’s new 1814 Constitution was given this wording:

The Evangelical-Lutheran religion shall remain the public religion of the state. Inhabitants belonging to it have the duty to raise their children in it. Jesuits and monastic orders are not to be tolerated. Jews are still to be excluded from access to the Realm.

So, independent Norway got started on a footing of candid religious intolerance. And, after 1814, Norway has only slowly evolved toward a modern, multicultural, pluralist, and religiously tolerant society. Here are a few main steps in this slow process:

1845: Lutheran Religious Monopoly Partly Lifted. Only in 1845 was legislation passed that lifted the ban on religious dissidents, a ban barring any religious affiliation other than that of the Church of Norway, i.e., the Evangelical-Lutheran state church. The new 1845 Act on Religious Dissidents recognized the right of a limited set of Protestant denominations to exist in Norway.

1851, 1897, and 1956: Constitutionally Mandated Intolerance Repealed. After intense public debates and against much resistance, liberal forces succeeded in 1851 in having the constitutional provision excluding Jews from access to Norway reversed. Similarly, the constitutional ban on monastic orders was lifted in 1897, and the ban on Jesuits was finally dropped in 1956. (The banning of Jesuits from Norway was incompatible with Norwegian compliance with the European Convention on Human Rights, which Norway had already helped draft, and had ratified.)

1878: Civil Service Careers Opened to Non-Lutherans. The Constitution originally required that all public servants belong to the Church of Norway. This rule was revoked in 1878, and civil service careers also became open to people who were not members of the state church.

1919: End to Exclusion of Non-Lutherans from Ministerial Posts in the Government of Norway. The constitution originally required that all cabinet ministers belong to the Church of Norway. In 1919 this rule was modified to the effect that at least fifty percent of government ministers must belong to the Church of Norway.

1964: Breakthroughs for Religious Nondiscrimination. In 1964 freedom of religion became guaranteed by the constitution by insertion of the following provision into the text of paragraph 2 (quoted above; as reported, the three original provisions of religious intolerance in paragraph 2 had already been deleted): “*All inhabitants of the Realm shall enjoy free exercise of religion.*”

1969: Breakthroughs for Religious Nondiscrimination. Then, in 1969, new legislation regulating the legal status and the public support of *all* religious communities was passed. A new Act on Communities of Belief provides that any *religious community* outside the Church of Norway (and, as amended in 1981, also any nonreligious “*life-stance*” community) is entitled to receive annually from the Norwegian state and municipalities the same financial support per member as is received per member by the Church of Norway. (All costs of running the Church of Norway are covered by the government and financed from ordinary taxes.) This new arrangement means that the Norwegian state has taken on a *general legal obligation* to support all religious communities *and* all nonreligious life-stance communities in Norway *without any*

discrimination. As a consequence, dissident belief communities of all descriptions receive more generous financial support from the public purse in Norway than in any other European country. Incidentally, in Norway legal registration of new religious communities or of nonreligious belief communities is relatively easy: To become recognized and registered you need a written statement of a creed (or a worldview, or a life stance), a list of members who adhere to this doctrine, plus written statutes and a responsible associational leadership. Once a belief community meets such conditions, it is eligible for public support without being subjected to any additional governmental “quality control.”¹

1999: Major International Human Rights Treaties Incorporated into Norwegian Law. In 1999 Stortinget (Norway’s legislature) passed the Norwegian Human Rights Act, making the European Convention on Human Rights with its several Protocols, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights directly applicable by Norwegian courts, and with legal priority over conflicting provisions in other Norwegian laws. Henceforth the major international human rights provisions on freedom of religion or belief may be enforced by Norwegian courts.

Especially in light of the last two points, one might think that all is now well for freedom of religion or belief in the social-democratic petroleum kingdom of Norway. But not so—at least not in the eyes of many discerning Norwegians, inside as well as outside the Church of Norway. Why? A number of peculiar privileges, and peculiar liabilities, pertaining to the Church of Norway still remain:

- ♦ The Church of Norway is, in spite of everything, a fully intact, and still somewhat privileged, state church, with eighty-three percent of the country’s population *automatically* enrolled as members;
- ♦ On the other hand, secular state officials still control some of the internal affairs of the Church of Norway;
- ♦ Norway’s public kindergartens and schools still have the legal obligation to provide *all* pupils with “a moral and Christian education”;
- ♦ The Church of Norway administers all public graveyards;
- ♦ First and foremost, priests from the Church of Norway are employed in the Norwegian military, in Norwegian state hospitals, and in Norwegian prisons;
- ♦ And by and large only priests from the Church of Norway are called on to speak in situations of public emergencies, or at public festive occasions, in Norway.

These, then, are among the remaining controversial matters that have been addressed in the sequence of noteworthy interfaith dialogues and interconfessional cooperation projects that have been conducted in Norway after 1985.

¹ Unfortunately, a discriminating rider has been added to the administrative regulation of annual financial support from the government to religious and life-stance communities in Norway. Whereas belief communities recognized as “religious” are eligible for state and municipal support according to the number of their members *without further qualification*, a belief community that does not seek—or is denied—state recognition as a “religious community” (“trudomssamfunn”) is routinely recognized as a “life-stance community” (“livssynssamfunn”). But life-stance communities are eligible for governmental financial support *only if they have five hundred members or more*.

III. 1985 TO PRESENT: INTERFAITH DIALOGUE EMERGES IN NORWAY

Having indicated the historical background, we can now report on seven major events in the emerging interfaith dialogue in Norway during the last fifteen years of the twentieth century.

A. 1985: CHRISTIANS AND HUMANISTS START INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AT LILLEHAMMER

Norway's Humanist Association is the largest national Humanist Association in any country and by the end of 2000 had more than 70,000 members. Founded in 1956, the Humanist Association has been the standard antagonist of the Church of Norway, both criticizing the Christian religion and combating the existence of a state church and its predominance in Norwegian schools and in many other arenas of public life. In 1984 in the town of Lillehammer, regional chapters of the Humanist Association and of the Church of Norway Association, cooperating with the Nansen Academy, opened Norway's first organized interfaith dialogue on the theme: "Humanists and Christians: What Separates Us—What Unites Us?"

At the 1985 Lillehammer dialogue, participants were very candid, giving free outlet to many years of pent-up mutual aggression and prejudice—and ignorance. But, the air was cleared. Certainly, old grievances were expressed and important divides between Christian believers and Humanist nonbelievers were underlined, but by engaging in serious discussion, participants were also profoundly surprised to discover large and significant areas of *common moral concern*, e.g., about abuse of drugs, treatment of the elderly, how to combat xenophobia, and the moral education of the young. And many participants not only learned to know, but also learned to like, persons on the other side of the confessional fence. Personal and institutional bonds were established across confessional divides, and a tradition of annual interfaith dialogues at the Lillehammer Nansen Academy was initiated. In this way boundaries have become less rigid, and black-and-white images of one another have become modified. Through dialogue based on mutual respect, old disagreements have become better understood, to some extent even appreciated, and supplemented with a widening area of publicly significant normative agreement and common causes.

B. 1988: MUSLIMS AND CHRISTIANS BEGIN SERIOUS DIALOGUE IN OSLO

The presence in Norway of a sizable number of Muslims is a very recent phenomenon, predominantly due to immigration of workers during the last forty years, mainly from Pakistan, Turkey, and other Muslim countries. Muslims in Norway now number about sixty thousand people.

Organized dialogue between Muslims and Christians in Norway started in September 1988 at the invitation of Vestre Aker congregation (Church of Norway) in Oslo. The topic for this first public Christian-Muslim dialogue was "Norway as a multicultural society." This dialogue was to initiate a series of Christian-Muslim conferences and projects in the Oslo region, addressing both spiritual questions and secular issues of concern to

both parties. The foremost Church of Norway personality in this process has been, and still is, Oddbjørn Leirvik, a priest and a scholar whose deep knowledge of Islam and practical grasp of dialogue is widely recognized. An important feature of the Oslo dialogue between Muslims and Christians has been the unobtrusive emphasis on equality and mutual respect between the two parties. As a follow-up, the Islamic Council Norway and the Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations institutionalized a permanent link in 1992, thus launching a publicly formalized cooperation between the largest religious minority and the majority religion in Norway.

C. 1991: NANSEN ACADEMY DIALOGUE “COMMUNAL ETHIC IN MULTICULTURAL NORWAY”

Before the arrival in Norway of guest workers from abroad in the beginning of the 1970s, only the Humanist Association (1956), the Mosaic Community of Faith (1892), and the Bahá'í community (1948) represented organized alternatives to Christian majority society.

Around 1970 several of the great world religions arrived in Norway and gradually established organizations of their own. The number of organized Muslims has grown steadily from about one thousand in 1980 to about sixty thousand today. Also, Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs have formed organizations and so have new religious movements. Religious and life stance pluralism have gained momentum and become a challenge to the state church and the majority religion.

Against this background the Nansen Academy, having obtained financial support from the Norway Ministry of Church and Education, initiated a dialogue project in 1991 called “Communal Ethics in Multicultural Norway.” Its purpose was to:

- ♦ establish personal bonds between people from different religious and life stance backgrounds,
- ♦ impart knowledge about the religion or life stance of other parties,
- ♦ make an attempt at establishing a basic communal ethic in a multicultural Norway,
- ♦ seek solutions for practical conflicts that arise once people with differing religions and life stances meet and are bound to live together.

On the part of Christians, the Church of Norway, the Catholic Church, and the Methodist Church were represented; beyond that, representatives of Islam, Humanism, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, and the Bahá'í community were participants. This group of sixteen people undertook something hitherto untried in Norway: they sought by way of dialogue to seek out a maximally extensive set of shared value commitments, to identify foreseeable conflicts, and to find constructive ways of handling these conflicts.

The dialogue was founded on a number of core values: a considered *toleration* that may be grounded in various normative traditions, an aptitude for empathy across border lines, a readiness to appreciate and learn from others, and the ability to put up with what one is critical of. Fidelity to partly diverging fundamental values implies readiness to be clear also about *disagreements* and about *limits to toleration*. Therefore candid interfaith conversation includes conflicts and confrontations.

The dialogue group agreed that conversations had to be conducted in a spirit of unimpeded *truthfulness* where one is ready to recognize destructive features of one's own traditions. Religions have been deployed in the service of good and evil, destructively as well as constructively. Here the concept of *truth* is crucial. The group agreed that peaceful coexistence is possible, provided each party permits the other party to testify to the truth it has found—and simultaneously recognizes that the whole and perfect truth belongs to no party.

Open and candid dialogue is predicated on *equal dignity*. No party must have reason to think it is overruled due to basic inequalities of power and life circumstances. To establish such equality within the group, conversations started with each participant telling her or his life story. The group did not begin with doctrines but with human beings, who are always more than their opinions and positions. The upshot was that getting to know others as human beings also made it easier to relate constructively to the opinions of others.

Once initial procedures and principles were settled, the group started its conversation about questions related to the course of human life, from conception to death. On each theme “shared positions” as well as “peculiar or conflicting positions” were expressed and noted. Among the themes addressed were: biotechnology, abortion, naming of persons, circumcision, children and youth, freedom and limits to freedom, marriage and divorce, equal rights and equal dignity, polygamy, homosexuality, old age, euthanasia, autopsy, funerals, the value basis of public schools, same public schools for all/private schools, education in religion and life stance, celebration of public or religious holidays and feasts, economic support of religious or life stance communities, and access to Norway for religious leaders.

The purpose of these first discussions among participants of all major religious and life stance communities in Norway was *not* to discover a *shared ethic*, but to elaborate a *communal ethic*. A shared ethic, in the intended sense, would only touch on themes about which consensus was available, and also grind down diverging views to generally acceptable minimum standards. A communal ethic, on the other hand, addresses all themes of importance to a decent community and examines basic values about which binding agreement can be achieved (on diverging grounds)—including how competing values must frequently be weighed. It deals with how a multicultural and multireligious people may live with their differences in institutions that can accommodate differences in mutually acceptable ways.

In their dialogue about a communal ethic in multicultural Norway, participants were forced to attend both to the beauty of a good compromise and the voice of individual conscience. After six two-day discussions spanning one year, the dialogue group expressed what really separated them in the following terms:

Our dialogue group has conducted several discussions of whether basic differences in ethical thinking separate “religious” from “secular” worldviews, or whether we are in crucial questions confronted with alliances that transgress against “spiritual” and “this-worldly” positions and also against the divides between religions. It seems that differences within religions and life stances are often as great as differences between them.

The above statement is borrowed from the 108-page report on the “Communal Ethic in a Multicultural Norway” dialogue project published by the Norwegian University Press in 1993.² The report contains a wealth of specific and more general proposals, recommendations, and analyses, and has functioned as a fount of ideas for interfaith dialogue work in Norway.

D. 1996: NANSEN ACADEMY DIALOGUE “RELIGIONS, LIFE STANCES, AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN NORWAY”

One of the crucial themes addressed by the 1991 dialogue group was the challenge both to religions and ideologies stemming from universally binding human rights: “How does each community of faith or belief accommodate, support, and justify a commitment on internally credible grounds for the endorsement and observance of human rights?” But human rights is also a challenge to the state and the larger society: “How well are all human rights pertaining to the recognition, unimpeded exercise, and enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief catered for by the Norwegian state or by our society?”

In 1996 the Nansen Academy obtained governmental financial support for its second interfaith dialogue and cooperation project devoted exclusively to the theme “Religions, Life Stances, and Human Rights in Norway.” The purpose was to:

- ♦ elucidate the potential grounding of, and the traditions pertaining to, human rights in the various religions and life stances present in Norway,
- ♦ reflect upon and systematize the interrelations of human rights ideals and realities practiced in Norway,
- ♦ make proposals for the strengthening of human rights within different religious and life stance groups—and in Norway generally.

It would lead too far to report, even in outline, on the ramified discussions about these matters during more than one year between Muslims, Sikhs, Jews, Catholics, Pentecostals, Buddhists, Bahá’ís, Humanists, New Age people, Greek Orthodox, and Lutherans. The matters addressed by the dialogue group include: lofty issues of high principles, as well as practical realities of public administration; thorny issues of past failures in each tradition and recent reinterpretations of scriptures and principles in support of equal dignity and human rights; and the testing of minority demands on state and society in Norway against the practice of coreligionists in majority positions in other countries. Many issues of principle and a host of practical proposals can be found in the dialogue report (250 pages), again published by the Norwegian University Press.³ To a very large extent interfaith agreement was reached—without compromising specificity.

This dialogue report became more controversial than the earlier one (on communal ethics in Norway) since some of its recommendations, especially on public education in religion, life stance, and ethics in Norwegian schools, went against political majority compromises reached by the legislature (Stortinget). We cannot spell out details here

² Oddbjørn Leirvik, ed., *Felleskapsetikk i et flerkulturelt Norge* (Common ethics in a multicultural Norway) (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1993).

and shall turn to another interconfessional undertaking that further demonstrates that such enterprises, though peaceful and orderly, may also indicate deep conflicts of value and interests—but can hopefully facilitate their long-term resolution.

E. 1994 TO PRESENT: INTERFAITH “CAMPAIGN FOR FREEDOM OF BELIEF IN NORWEGIAN SCHOOLS”

Norway has few private schools. Eighty-nine percent of all children attend public schools. For more than 150 years, there has been some possibility for pupils not belonging to the state church to be exempted from the school subject “Knowledge of Christianity.” Since 1974 such pupils have had the option to attend the subject “Education in Alternative Worldviews.”

In 1995 the Norwegian government presented plans to replace “Knowledge of Christianity” and “Education in Alternative Worldviews” with an integrated, and mandatory, school subject: “Knowledge of Christianity and Information about Other Religions and Life Stances.”

Minorities perceived that their parental rights to freedom of belief were jeopardized. Their protest against the mandatory new school subject gave birth to a broadly based “Campaign for Freedom of Belief in Norwegian Schools.” Leaders of minority religious communities and life stance organizations came together. Jews and Muslims, Humanists and Buddhists worked side by side, along with some members of the Church of Norway. Several political youth organizations, some trade unions, and some student organizations also joined this interfaith campaign for religious freedom and equality in Norwegian schools.

In the course of working together for campaign targets, minority representatives became aware of several additional matters of common concern—issues that it would be fruitful to discuss and try to tackle cooperatively. Gradually the idea matured that what was needed was a national forum for interfaith dialogue and cooperation that would embrace as many religious and life stance communities as possible. The attempt was made to include all major religious and belief groups in Norway including the Church of Norway. In this way the experience of divisive struggle about freedom of belief in Norwegian schools gave rise to the founding of a common interfaith institution that now enjoys wide political support. The aims of the Campaign for Freedom of Belief in Norwegian Schools have not been achieved. The struggle is still being waged against majority political decisions, and cases filed by minority communities (Humanists and Muslims respectively) are still pending before Norwegian courts. In the case of Humanist parents against the Norwegian state, a Supreme Court decision was reached 22 August 2001. Five judges unanimously found against the Humanist parents’ right to have their children exempted from mandatory participation in “Knowledge of Christianity, Religions, and Life Stances” classes (as the new Norwegian religious education curriculum is now called). The Humanists are likely to bring their case to the European Human Rights Court in Strasbourg. Norway’s Muslims will surely follow suit.

³ Inge Eidsvåg and Lena Larsen, eds., *Religion, livssyn og menneskerettigheter i Norge* (Religions, life stances, and human rights in Norway) (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1997).

F. 1996: THE COUNCIL FOR RELIGIOUS AND LIFE STANCE COMMUNITIES IN NORWAY IS FOUNDED

The Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities in Norway was established 30 May 1996. Representatives from eight major belief communities came together in the quarters of a Muslim congregation. It was a very special occasion when, one by one, their leaders rose and affirmed their intent to be part of the proposed interfaith council in Norway.

The Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities is unique because of the broad scope of member communities, because members work together on a platform devised entirely by themselves, and because they operate independently of government interference. Member communities today include: the Alternative Network (a New Age group), the Bahá'í Community of Norway, the Buddhist Community of Norway, the Jewish Communities in Norway, the Norwegian Humanist Association (which organizes nonbelievers, agnostics, and atheists), the Islamic Council of Norway, the Council of Free Churches in Norway (Protestants), Sanatan Mandir Sabha Norway (Hindus), and the Church of Norway.

The only major group still not participating as a full member is the Catholic Church, but it has observer status and participates in all meetings. The first elected leader of the Council was a Pentecostal pastor. The present leader is a Buddhist.

The goals of the Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities are defined in the statutes as follows:

- ♦ to promote mutual understanding and respect between different religious and life stance communities through dialogue,
- ♦ to work towards equality between various religious and life stance communities in Norway based on the United Nations Covenants on Human Rights and on the European Convention on Human Rights,
- ♦ to work, internally and externally, with social and ethical issues from the perspective of religions and life stances.

From the beginning, the Norwegian government took a great interest in the Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities in Norway. A quotation from a 1996 parliamentary document is a case in point (Stortingsmelding nr. 17, 1996/1997):

Information exchange and dialogue between religious and humanist communities, public authorities, and the general public are important in order to avoid regarding other people as enemies and to prevent conflict. The Council can be a useful partner in a dialogue with the authorities. The relevant public authorities should encourage this type of dialogue and assure that the Council is heard in issues that arise.

The Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities in Norway never practices majority voting. Everyone must agree before the Council goes public with a position. This does imply quite a bit of work, but it is absolutely necessary to sustain trust among member communities.

A key word, then, is serious and well-informed dialogue—and dialogue with no hidden agenda. The agenda of such dialogues does not include proselytizing, it does not aim for a comprehensive consensus between differing religious or life stance communities, and it does not strive for agreement in theological matters. In Norway the

state church has enjoyed a near monopoly in public theological and moral discourse; hence minorities will never trust a decision taken by the religious majority on their behalf. Mutual trust is grounded on cooperation and in the possibility of making oneself heard.

Each member organization is expected to put in an equal amount of work and an equal financial contribution. Each member organization has two members on the board of the Council. It is strange that the majority religion, covering about 83 percent of the people, has the same formal influence as have the Bahá'ís with only few members in Norway. But this arrangement enhances the sense of equality.

Since 1999 the Council has received an annual grant from the government, enabling it to have a small administration and making it possible for the Council to keep up its interreligious dialogue work. The Council has to apply for a grant each year, and the government may approve or deny the application. As a consequence the Council also has to submit an annual report and a financial account of its operations.

All issues where religious faith and humanism have significant social repercussions are discussed by the Council, including questions about human rights, genetic research, euthanasia, educational policies, the role of media in society, contested court and administrative decisions, etc. The Council hosts interfaith seminars and, hopefully, it will inspire scholarly research.

So far the Council has hardly conducted theological dialogues, but it has discussed how to make authors of school textbooks give a better and more correct presentation of each religion or belief. The Council has also addressed a host of issues of particular concern to religious communities; e.g., it has advised against modernization of the spelling of religious terms, protested against a proposal from a political party to forbid circumcising baby boys, and requested that political parties not use religions or beliefs as tools in their electoral campaigns. The Council has also pointed out that it is unsatisfactory that Norway gives only a four-year residence permit to most Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, or Buddhist clergy coming from abroad, whereas Christian priests who can document a higher education have no problem getting residence permits lasting more than four years.

Of course, the Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities in Norway is still very much occupied with the mandatory school subject "Knowledge of Christianity, Religions, and Life Stances." The subject was reassessed by parliament (Stortinget) in early summer 2001. The outcome, beyond the revised *name*, brought little significant change. Minority religion/life-stance parents are still not allowed to withdraw their children entirely from this subject. And Norwegian public schools are still by law obliged to provide all pupils with a "moral and Christian education." The struggle for unfettered freedom of religion or belief in Norwegian schools continues.⁴ But there is an irony at work here: The political forces in Norway that persistently uphold a modicum of restrictions on freedom of religion or belief are probably oblivious to the service they thereby render to interfaith solidarity and cooperation! The Council for Religious and Life-Stance Communities in Norway surely "remains apprised of the matter."

⁴ See also the chapter by Plesner in this volume.

G. THE OSLO COALITION ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

In 1997 the Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities in Norway was approached by a group of academics, as well as by some prominent religious leaders who wanted to organize a large international conference in support of freedom of religion or belief. The Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities was invited to host what became the Oslo Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

The plans were ambitious. Supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Norway, and also later by the European Communities, the Oslo Conference took place in August 1998. More than two hundred religious leaders, academics, experts, and resource persons participated. At the conclusion of the conference the Oslo Declaration on Freedom of Religion or Belief⁵ was unanimously adopted, identifying directions for future action. In accordance with the Declaration, the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief has been established as a non-governmental and internationally responsive organization.

The Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief is a new international network consisting of experts and representatives from religious and life stance communities worldwide. Academics are one important group, and so are representatives from NGOs, other international organizations, and civil society. The Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities in Norway is the national underpinning of the Oslo Coalition and presently has three board members.

The activity of the Oslo Coalition is based on the Oslo Declaration on Freedom of Religion or Belief. As a follow-up of the Oslo Declaration, the Coalition has worked out a strategic plan for development and practical support for article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The work of the Oslo Coalition addresses the United Nations System, prodding for an increase in resources, financial and otherwise, in support of freedom of religion or belief. It endorses the implementation of the work and recommendations of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, and encourages the High Commissioner for Human Rights to develop a plan for coordination of resources for freedom of religion or belief within the UN.

High priority tasks of the Oslo Coalition are: promotion of interfaith dialogue and practical cooperation projects, reconciliation, and education. The Oslo Coalition is prepared to work with academic institutions, the media, and political institutions at different levels and in various countries, as well as with different religious or belief communities, NGOs, and international organizations.

The Oslo Coalition has an International Advisory Council consisting of distinguished persons from all over the world. Its president is the Church of Norway Bishop of Oslo, Gunnar Stålsett. The small coalition administration is at the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights, University of Oslo. A board of seven members and a coordinator have the responsibility for running the administration.

In 1999 and 2000 the Oslo Coalition cosponsored and participated in several international conferences devoted to the scholarly study and/or practical advance of freedom of religion or belief, in Russia, Ukraine, each of the Baltic countries, Azerbaijan, the United States, and western Europe.

⁵ Reprinted in this volume, Appendix F.

In 2000 a delegation from the Coalition visited China and conducted extensive conversations with administrative and religious leaders about the situation for different faith communities in China. The visit was the beginning of an extensive cooperative process of dialogues and mutual visits between the two countries dealing with freedom of religion or belief. A Chinese delegation visited Norwegian religious and life stance communities and administrative bodies in September 2001.

As of summer 2001, Oslo Coalition plans for the immediate future include:

- ♦ to participate in and contribute to a United Nations project on screening and reform of school curriculums in religious and ethical education (The Madrid Conference in November 2001);
- ♦ to publish and distribute worldwide, with generous support from the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the volume in which this essay is published: *Facilitating Freedom of Religion or Belief: A Deskbook*. The purpose of this publication is to analyze, elucidate, and inform competently about important issues and problems in the field of freedom of religion or belief worldwide, and to facilitate the implementation of international conventions and declarations in this field;
- ♦ to help organize a long-term dialogue and cooperation project between Muslims and Christians in Indonesia;
- ♦ to explore the basis for Norwegian support of interreligious dialogues and cooperation projects locally in the Russian Federation, tentatively in the Orenburg and/or Kazan regions.

IV. CONCLUSION

Religion and belief is a powerful tool, and in the wrong hands it may lead to bitter and bloody conflicts and even prolonged wars: not necessarily because of the religious belief or ideology itself, but because some persons or some groups use religion (or atheist ideology, for that matter) as a tool to gain power or to maintain special interests. Norwegians have been spared such calamities, but Norwegian history exhibits ample evidence of another troublesome aspect of religion and belief: Intrinsic in religions and other comprehensive normative traditions is the temptation of excluding outsiders from equal public status and from equal respect, as persons or as communities.

Our recent experience in Norway is that religion and belief can also serve as a basis for eliminating animosities and strengthening understanding and cooperation across ethnic, ideological, and religious divides. Here interfaith dialogue, as described in this chapter, is a commendable option, also from the vantage point of the society at large.

Our experience also indicates that the modern state may play a significant and constructive role, if our goal is to nurture the potentials of religions and life stances for dialogue, reconciliation, mutual understanding, and solidarity in society at large.

The state is responsible for the space between and around the communities of faith, for protecting their exercise of confessional freedom, and for safeguarding the rights of individual human beings to exercise and enjoy real freedom of religion or belief.

Exercising these freedoms, leaders and individual members of confessional communities should, in an increasingly plural and multireligious world, be ready to engage in serious interfaith dialogue and sustained interreligious cooperation.

