

Christian-Muslim Relations in a State Church Situation: Politics of Religion and Interfaith Dialogue

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The context of the following reflections on Christian-Muslim relations and interfaith dialogue is the state church situation in Norway.

During the last few decades, the state church system has been in a process of adjustment to a pluralist, multireligious reality. It has been modified by institutional reforms aimed at church autonomy, and by compensatory measures meant to balance those aspects of the system that would otherwise be discriminating against other faiths. With regard to finances, compensatory measures were introduced in 1969. Since then, every faith community (including Muslim) which registers itself has been entitled to exactly the same amount of money per member as the Church of Norway receives per capita in financial support from municipal and national budgets.

During the 1990s, various forms of *interfaith dialogue* evolved, and were also to some extent institutionalised. In 1996, an interfaith Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities in Norway was formed, as an NGO-initiative. In 1998, the Council established the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief, in which representatives of the faith communities engage each other and international partners on issues pertaining to religious freedom and interfaith cooperation. In such multilateral forums, Muslims participate on a par with representatives of the other faiths. In addition, since 1993, there is a bilateral Contact Group for the Church of Norway and the Islamic Council in Norway.

While the faith communities have engaged each other in dialogue and cooperation, popular political discourses often point in a different direction. Revealing an increasing tendency to reaffirm the so-called Christian cultural heritage as the uniting bond of the Norwegian nation, 'Christian and humanist values' have been invoked as the foundation of its public institutions.

Parallel to these *communitarian* tendencies on the part of the national religion, the Norwegian state has also pinpointed some *universal* concerns and challenged both the national church and the faith communities in such matters as freedom of expression, interreligious tolerance, women's rights and the rights of children.

In what follows, I will discuss the political dimension of Christian-Muslim relations, in the overall perspective of communitarianism versus universalism. Whereas communitarians focus on the formative role of communities in the lives of individuals and the rights of these communities in society, universalists give tend always to give priority to individual rights which they claim should be protected by the state – if necessary against the faith communities. In addition to questions pertaining to the politics of religion, I shall also reflect on the role of interfaith dialogue in the Norwegian context.

THE RELIGIOUS SCENE IN NORWAY

In spite of a steady reform process that has made the dominant Church of Norway more autonomous, Norway remains a state with a religion. Paragraph 2 of the Norwegian constitution runs as follows (in my translation): '(1) All inhabitants of the kingdom shall be free to exercise their religion. (2) The Evangelical-Lutheran religion remains the public religion of the state. Inhabitants confessing this religion, are obliged to raise their children in the same.' The second part originates from 1814, the first part was added in 1964. Formally, the King is formally the head of the Church, and half of the members of government are still required to be Lutheran Christians. Only in 1989 was the appointment of clergy delegated to independent church bodies. But the state has retained the final say in the appointment of bishops.

More than 90% of the population, which amounts to a total of 4.5 million, is formally Christian. Eighty-six percent belong to the Lutheran state church, which in financial terms remains fully integrated into municipal and state budgets. The Catholic and Pentecostal churches each constitute 1% of the population, the other free churches some 2% altogether. Given the fact that only about 10% of state church members are regular church-goers, on the level of activities there is more of a balance between the Church of Norway, the Catholic church and the free churches.

Apart from the high percentage of state church members, two salient features of organised religiosity in Norway can be cited. One feature is non-religious: Norway has got an exceptionally strong secular Humanist Association which offers a non-religious framework for morality and ceremonies. Only 1.5% of the population are members, but their influence is disproportionate to their number. When in 1974, an alternative subject (named 'Life Stances') was introduced to Christian education in primary school, it was mainly the result of secular humanist lobbying.

Secondly: a high percentage of resident Muslims in Norway have signed up for membership in Muslim associations. According to estimates from 2002, Norway had about 100 000 (permanent or temporary) inhabitants of a Muslim background, which means that Muslims make up more than 2% of the population. The major countries of origin are Pakistan, the Balkans, Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Somalia and Morocco. The total number of those with a Muslim background is smaller than in either Sweden or Denmark, but their level of organisation is higher. In 2000, 70% of people of Muslim origin in Norway, including children, were members of a mosque or Muslim association. It should thus be noted that the relatively high degree of organisation reflects the decision of the parents, and not necessarily salient trends among Muslim youth.

Organised plurality and migrating souls

In the aforementioned interfaith council, formally elected representatives of the state church, the other churches, the Islamic Council, the Buddhist Association, the Jewish community, the Bahá'í faith, the Hindu community, the Humanist Federation and the so-called Alternative Network sit together and conduct their business on a principle of consensus. The fact that the non-confessional Alternative Network is part of the interfaith council points to another important aspect of multireligious Norway. Along with a well-organised plurality of faith communities, there are also many 'migrating souls' who may be less loyal towards their faith communities than what their formal affiliation might indicate.

In particular, this is true of state church members, many of whom form their identity quite freely and nourish themselves from a multitude of spiritual sources. Religious individualism also

affects Norwegian Muslims. Firstly, they have a great number of institutional, Islamic identities to choose from. As in many other European societies, all major Islamic trends and a wide array of Muslim transnational organisations are represented, together with indigenous, youth- or women-based organisations of the Euro-Islam type. Secondly, many of the younger generation construct plural identities in which ‘Islam’ is but one out of many flexible elements.¹ Bearing in mind the fact that among first generation immigrants, the cultural (e.g. Pakistani) part of the identity may be stronger than the religious part, one will always have to raise the question of exactly which ‘Muslims’ and which ‘Christians’ we are referring to when addressing Christian-Muslim relations.

In an article about changing Muslim and Christian identities, Jacques Waardenburg gives a typology of different social, cultural and political frameworks in which Christians and Muslims construct and negotiate their identities. Across contextual differences, however, he notes that on both the Christian and Muslim side identities have become increasingly personalised and plural in nature: ‘Leaving apart the influence of political and economic power, already the complexity of modern societies means that people now participate in several identities which are often juxtaposed to each other rather than being put in an hierarchical order’.²

POLITICAL RESPONSES TO ORGANISED PLURALITY

Government responses to the multireligious situation, which is still felt as a new challenge in Norway, have been varied. In what follows, I shall distinguish between (a) what I term state-supported, Christian communitarianism; (b) a politics of recognition affirming the rights of communities; and (c) universalist oriented policies focused on individual rights.

(a) State-supported, Christian communitarianism

In the field of education, some analysts have identified the emergence of a kind of state-supported communitarianism on the part of a liberal version of Christianity. When a political alliance of the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats introduced a new and mandatory subject of religious education in 1996-97, this replaced a previous system of multiple choices between (1) Christian education, (2) a Life Stances-alternative or (3) no religious education at all. The new subject was given the cumbersome and revealing name ‘Knowledge of Christianity with Information about Religion and Life Stances’. In 2002, the name was modified to the slightly less hierarchical ‘Knowledge of Christianity, Religions and Life Stances’.³

Not surprisingly, many minority representatives felt that the initial title of the subject was discriminating and overly self-affirmative on the part of Christianity. This impression was strengthened by formulations in the general part of the reformed curriculum of which the new subject was but one part. Here, under the heading of ‘Christian and Humanistic values’, it was stated that ‘Christian faith and tradition constitute a deep current in our history – a heritage that

¹ See Sissel Østberg: *Pakistani Children in Oslo. Islamic Nurture in a Secular Context*. PhD-thesis, Institute of Education, University of Warwick, 1998.

² Jacques Waardenburg: ‘Muslims and Christians: changing identities’, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* vol. 11, no. 2:2000, p. 159.

³ An English version of the curriculum can be found in *The Curriculum for the 10-year Compulsory School in Norway*. Oslo: The Royal Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs, 1999, p. 95ff.

unites us as a people across religious persuasions’. Adding a reference to humanism, ‘Christian and humanistic tradition’ were referred to as ‘interwoven’.⁴

In order to understand minority resistance to the new subject, it should also be noted that primary schools in Norway have a Christian objects clause. The Education Act still states that ‘primary school is supposed to help in giving the pupils a Christian and moral upbringing ...’. This, of course, sheds additional (and indeed traditional) Christian-communitarian light on the new subject of Christian and religious education.

Since the new subject is nevertheless meant to be inclusive, only partial exemption is granted. Although a major aim of the new subject has been to create a space for interreligious learning and interfaith dialogue in school, many Muslims and secular humanists have seen the new subject as a kind of state-supported Christian communitarianism. The Islamic Council and the Humanist Federation have both sued the state for having eliminated the right to full exemption, and hence the right to establish alternatives.⁵

If one reads the general aims of the new subject, one may detect a mixed influence from communitarian and universalist thought. The first aim (according to the revised 2002 curriculum) is to make all pupils ‘thoroughly acquainted’ with the Bible and with Christianity – both as a ‘cultural heritage’ and as a ‘living source of belief, morality, and view of life’. In the second aim, it is stated that all pupils shall also be introduced to other world religions and life philosophies as ‘living sources of belief, morality, and views of life’. The third aim is to make them all ‘familiar with the Christian and humanist values on which school education is based’. In the fourth and fifth aims, the subject is presented as an interaction between identity formation and dialogue training: ‘religious and ethical education shall promote mutual respect and dialogue, and stimulate the pupils’ personal growth and development’.

What kind of project is this? Is it Christian communitarianism – an attempt to counter postmodern individualist pluralism with some solid knowledge of Christian heritage and values? Or should it be taken as a potentially universalist project which treats all religions on an equal basis as ‘sources of belief, morality and views of life’, with the overall aim of training new generations in dialogue? In both political discussions and pedagogical practice, the new subject has proved to be liable to both interpretations.

(b) Politics of recognition, focused on communities

The universalist potentials of the new subject could alternatively be taken as a generous kind of communitarianism – in the form of multiculturalism. Four religions (Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism) and one particular ‘life stance’ (Secular Humanism) have been selected as major topics along with Christianity and the more universalist theme of ‘philosophy and ethics’. In the initial phases of the planning process, in which the general principles of the new subject were established, neither the faith communities nor individuals representing other religions than Christianity took part. But as a result of protests, more or less representative bodies of the named faiths were eventually invited to suggest how their faiths should be represented in the curriculum. They were also invited to give their comments on proposed textbooks.

⁴ *The Curriculum for the 10-year Compulsory School in Norway*, p. 23.

⁵ Their cases have been turned down in Norwegian courts, but the Humanist Association has declared its intention to bring the case to the European Human Rights Court in Strasbourg.

The eventual inclusion of the faith communities in the formative process could be taken as a hesitant ‘politics of recognition’, which addresses the communal dimension of moral and religious identity.⁶ In general, the Christian Democrats have been advocating a politics of recognition more clearly than the Social Democrats. In the Norwegian context, many Christian Democrats have seen themselves as representatives of a conservative counter-culture. This may have made them more fit for a ‘politics of difference’ than the modernist unitary thought typical of the Social Democrats.

In the early 1980s, the Social Democrats turned to a kind of state-supported, Christian communitarianism which was propounded as more inclusive than the counter-cultural type that has traditionally been represented by the Christian Democrats. Before that, Social Democrats in Norway (as in Sweden) had typically considered religion as a private matter. Social Democrats have also been sceptical towards religiously based private schools which are relatively few in Norway, comprising only some 1.5% of primary school pupils. In 1995, the Social Democrat government turned down the first application to establish a state supported Muslim primary school, arguing that such a school would not be conducive to the social and cultural integration of immigrants. Indicating also a state feminist concern, they were particularly worried on behalf of the girls. This means that the Social Democrats did not treat the application as a question of religious rights, but in the perspective of an ‘integration’ which in this case left little space for religiously based differences.

Four years later, the Christian Democrats approved the same application, and declared that in principle they would support Muslim schools on a par with private schools established by Christian minorities. As a token of the same politics of recognition, the Christian democrat prime minister made formal visits to the Muslim communities in both 1999 and 2002.

The way in which Norway has chosen to deal with financial issues in the field of religion goes well with a politics of recognition oriented towards communal rather than individual rights. Instead of refunding individual tax-payers, compensation for state church financing goes to organised faith communities, Muslims and secular humanists included. The system chosen must be seen against the background of a strong state church legacy, by which religion continues to be regarded as a matter of communal concern in its pluralist expression too.

The same is true of how the Law about equality between the sexes, which was introduced in 1978, is applied. Although state feminism has been a salient feature of Norwegian politics during the last decades, faith communities have been fully exempted from the equality laws’ claims and regulations. In this case too, the religious rights of faith communities have been given priority over the religious rights of individuals (*in casu*, women). In principle, the Church of Norway is also exempted for the equality law. But since clergy have traditionally been appointed by the state (which still appoints the bishops), state feminism has supplied the national church with female ministers since 1961. Since 1993, two female bishops have also been appointed. But in the case of other faith communities, the state has recognised their right to autonomy in gender politics and renounced any kind of state intervention.

The principle of a general exemption from the equality laws’ regulations is, however, debated. Many Social Democrats would like to see compliance with egalitarian principles as a

⁶ The term ‘politics of recognition’ (or ‘politics of difference’) has been used by Charles Taylor and others to characterise a liberal policy that adds to merely procedural and individualist understandings of equal rights, a concern for the cultural rights of collectives. See Charles Taylor: ‘The Politics of Recognition’, in Charles Taylor et al.: *Multiculturalism. Examining the Politics of Recognition*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1994.

prerequisite for receiving financial support from the state. That would imply setting a limit to the politics of recognition. But exactly where should such a limit be set, if one otherwise accepts that communitarian principles should rule in the politics of religion?

In some European countries, Muslim communities have claimed their right to autonomy in family law, in accordance with established principles in societies with a Muslim majority. The year 2003 saw the Norwegian media debating the establishment of a national Shari‘a council like in Britain and its constitutive effect on women’s rights especially in matters relating to divorce. Whereas conservative Muslims do not always recognise a legal divorce obtained in a Western country, Shari‘a councils in Europe have often been liberal in providing Muslim women with an additional religious legitimacy for their divorce. This indicates that multiculturalism might in some cases support the rights of vulnerable individuals and groups, despite being based on communitarian premises which are not in accord with the principle of universal individual rights. Although the issue at stake is not that of establishing separate Muslim family courts, the question of establishing a Shari‘a council has triggered a discussion about the salient principles of multiculturalism. The crux of the debate is about whether the state should have a common family legislation thereby having a uniform system of cultural legitimacy or whether it should rely on the kind of communitarian legitimacy which religious bodies have been traditionally offering.

(c) Supporting the universal rights of individual believers

The lines between communal and individual rights are not easily drawn. Even those who generally advocate a community-oriented politics of recognition would strongly affirm that certain individual rights must never be allowed to be violated by the faith communities. Establishing prohibitions against violence and forced loyalties are sufficient as general examples. In 1995-96, new legislation was enacted against forced marriages and female genital mutilation. None of the faith communities objected to this. Publicly confronting the cultural practices of some of their members, many Islamic organisations and Muslim women’s groups have signalled their readiness to cooperate with the authorities in order to abolish practices that involve force or violence.

Opinions may differ about the most efficient way of protecting individual rights. The question may be asked whether individual safeguard should evolve immanently from within cultural or religious groups or whether it should be brought about through extraneous pressure. In the past years, feminist activists have defended the rights of young Muslim girls who have become estranged and have broken with their families. They have also accused the Islamic community of not being serious enough on issues such as forced marriage and female circumcision. Controversial methods like the use of hidden cameras have been employed to “reveal” the real agenda of selected Muslim leaders. Yet others have appreciated that most Muslim leaders have taken a principled stand against forced marriages and female circumcision. However, some from within the ranks of secular humanists have criticised the Muslim leadership for merely idealistically declaring such practices as “un-Islamic” without challenging the cultural face of Islam as practiced by immigrant Muslims. Their argument is that religion and tradition are inextricably linked to each other and that a principled stand against practices such as forced marriages and female circumcision should not simply be viewed as “un-Islamic” but rather constituting an Islamic reality from the viewpoint of and reinforced by the traditions of certain immigrant communities.

Many Muslims insist that as far as the women's issue is concerned, individuals should be given priority over group interests. However, on the question of religious education in school, they may maintain a delicate balance between individual and group approaches. As mentioned above, both the Humanist Federation and the Islamic Council sued the state because of the new and compulsory system of Christian/religious education in primary schools. The courts were reluctant, however, to deal with faith communities as bearers of rights. In the question of exemption from religious education, the state institutions (schools, courts) have insisted on dealing with individuals rather than faith communities. The right of exemption applies to parents, not to religious or ideological organisations. The Humanist Federation and the Islamic Council were allowed, however, to represent the protests of named parents.

The legal controversy indicates a high degree of conflict surrounding religion in school. Local reports, however, testify to the fact that many minority parents (including Muslims and secular humanists) are relatively happy with the way in which the new subject works in practice. In monitoring minority responses to majority projects, one should therefore never be content with listening to the attitudes of organised communities and their spokesmen. Many members of faith communities have individual opinions that run counter to views expressed by their leaders. In some cases, they may be more liberal than their leaders – as independent believers with plural identities. In other cases, they may hold more conservative views – for instance on behalf of their cultural heritage.

Unresolved questions in the politics of religion

The examples cited of a not entirely consistent politics of religion in Norway raise a number of hard, general questions:

Should religion be considered as a private matter, or as a matter of communal concern? Who should be the main bearers of religious liberty rights – individuals, or faith communities?

Should state-supported communitarianism be abandoned altogether, together with the idea of 'Muslim' or 'Christian' states? As an entirely secularist ideal seems unlikely to be realised in many contexts, the question should perhaps be reformulated: How can state-supported communitarianism be balanced by measures that ensure a non-discriminating politics of recognition?

With regard to cultural and religious differences that should or should not be tolerated, what kind of national and global standards can be established? If the state moves beyond human rights protection and takes it upon itself to safeguard certain values in the field of religion, what kind of ambitions can a state have (for instance, of training pupils in religious tolerance or promoting equality between the sexes) without becoming authoritarian?

Should the state support individuals (for instance children and women) and their rights against their faith communities? Or should the state confine itself to a liberal 'politics of recognition' and only intervene in the internal affairs of faith communities when the life and health of individual believers are endangered?

With only 25 years of experience of making accommodations for multireligious pluralism, Norway enters the future with a mixed heritage of state religion *and* a strong subscription to individual human rights. Many people committed to human rights issues would like to abolish the remnants of the state church system as soon as possible. This is probably also true of most church leaders. But it is not at all sure that a state *without* a religion will give better opportunities for faith communities than what is offered by the present, modified state church system. The

alternative to a state church system is not necessarily a society in which religion is regarded as an entirely private matter. It could just as well be a society committed to a policy of multiculturalism in which religion continues to be regarded as a public matter. Religious and life stance communities would then be valued in their pluralist expressions, and could even continue (to some extent) to be supported financially by the state. The latter has been recommended by a church committee which in 2002 proposed changed relations between state and church, advocating (as an inclusive adjustment of the present system) what was termed an “an actively supporting politics of religion”.⁷

Many Norwegians – both Christians and Muslims – would probably agree that moral values and religious belief should continue to be regarded as a matter of communal concern. But in concrete matters, many hard questions will have to be resolved – at the intersection between value-based state policies, the liberty of faith communities and the rights of individuals.

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

What could be the role of interfaith dialogue, then, within the larger political framework indicated above?⁸ From the early 1990s to the establishment of the interfaith council in 1996, most of the dialogue projects were initiated by non-governmental organisations or institutions. Some also received funding from the state. Some, like that of the national Contact Group of the Church of Norway and the Islamic Council, were initiated by the majority church. In the Christian-Muslim contact group, women’s concerns have been raised as a shared Christian-Muslim perspective, as documented in a book produced by Christian and Muslim women about ‘Dialogue with and without the veil’.⁹ This exemplifies how societal issues can affect interfaith dialogue. In other cases, the initiative has come from the minorities, resulting in a strong focus on minority rights. The interfaith Council grew out of the minority alliance of secular humanists, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and the Alternative Network at a time when plans were first announced for the new and compulsory subject of Christian and religious education. Only after a year were the churches invited to form a representative body of all major faiths in Norway. In the interfaith council, the Church of Norway does not have the special prerogative of being a state church. It is just a faith community among many others. All constituents operate at the same level and on a regular basis with each other.

Among the general public, inclusive attitudes have long competed with mounting anxiety towards Islam and Muslims. In cultural and political debates centred on Christianity and Islam, church leaders have in general defended Muslim minority rights and protected their integrity against populist assaults. In 1997, Christian leaders of all confessions and theological tendencies joined hands with the Muslim community and warned publicly against the enemy images of Islam produced by the influential right wing/populist party *Fremskrittspartiet*.

Most of the cited interfaith initiatives have taken place on the leadership level. At that level, strong personal bonds have been forged. The first president of the interfaith council was a Pentecostal Christian, the second a Norwegian-born Buddhist. Their first secretary was a secular humanist. Since 1999, the coordinator of one of the interfaith council’s offshoots, the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief, has been a Muslim convert – a woman of Norwegian

⁷ *Samme kirke, ny ordning* (“Same church, new arrangement”), Kirkerådet: Oslo 2002.

⁸ For details and references regarding the following examples, see Oddbjørn Leirvik: “15 år med kristen-muslimsk dialog i Norge”, *Norsk Tidsskrift for Misjon* 3: 2002.

⁹ Anne Hege Grung and Lena Larsen: *Dialog med og uten slør*. Oslo: Pax 2000.

origin who was also elected as the president of the Islamic Council at the end of 2000. As indicated by the cited examples, many of those who have been in the forefront of interfaith enterprises in Norway are Norwegians by birth. A number of immigrant Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus have also taken actively part in national dialogues, and become part of personal networking on the leadership level. The dominance of ethnic Norwegians in interfaith dialogue might imply, however, that such dialogues have not yet been sufficiently rooted in the immigrant communities, who often have a cultural-specific rather than religious (in the normative sense of the term) agenda.

Some post 11 September developments

Global events such as 9/11, the bombing of Afghanistan and the occupation of Iraq affected interfaith relations in Norway. Firstly, 9/11 resulted in joint Humanist, Christian, Jewish and Muslim articulations against religious violence. Secondly, the bombing of Afghanistan did not lead to a difference of opinions on how terrorism should be best contained. Rather, representatives of Pakistani mosques and leaders in the Church of Norway sent a joint letter to the Christian Democrat Prime Minister, criticising his government for giving unreserved support to US policies and requesting that the war against terror should not be conducted in a manner which only inflicted more suffering on innocent civilians. Thirdly, the Norwegian government's refusal to join the US-led "coalition of the willing" for war on Iraq was in accord with the Church's position on the issue. When the war broke out the Prime Minister was quick enough to summon a meeting with the Islamic Council and other faith communities which demonstrated something like a faith-transcending, "Norwegian" consensus.

The arguments above underline the fact that, contrary to the clash of civilisation-thesis, moral disagreement in matters of religion, politics or violence very seldom coincides with religious divides. Value-based consensus transcends religious differences as was seen during the Afghanistan war. At least, this is how it seems at the leadership level. The reality at the grass root may be different. Some Norwegian teachers report that in the aftermath of 11 September, young Muslim boys revealed a secret admiration for Usama bin Laden. But many other teachers experienced the opposite, stating that their Muslim pupils underwent some sort of an identity crisis when they saw Islam being used to legitimise terrorist acts. Both representations are probably true.

Which one of these representations will become the dominant articulation depends more on the general cultural trends than on leadership. Organised interfaith can be an important element in fostering a culture of recognition, both at the personal level as well as on the symbolic levels. But dialogues between Christian and Muslim leadership and practitioners are not always in tune with dominant trends among the people. In Norway as elsewhere, formalised dialogues tend to be dominated by faith communities who profess a culture-transcending, normative identity like those of the moderate Islamists and the Western Buddhists. Ordinary Christians and Muslims have often other types of agenda. It can be the personal agenda of 'migrating souls', the cultural interests of a particular immigrant group, or the identity politics of a nationalist kind of Christianity.

Leadership dialogues may also run the risk of overlooking the experiences of those individuals who are, in one way or another, victimised within their own faith communities or become vulnerable due to certain practices of the faith communities. A thorough interfaith dialogue will have to be premised on the fact that its agenda will be self-critical towards the group

excesses of their respective faith communities. It should be more that willing to address some hard and important questions. It will be better if the state intervention is minimum leaving the greater part of the debate to the faith communities to handle. The theme of gender equality or the productions of hostile images are obvious examples. Although hostile images and disrespectful ways of talking about the “other” are always decried in normative discourses, they continue to flourish both in general culture and in the everyday lives of individual members of different faith communities.

Only by honest, self-critical and reflexive approaches to religion and culture can interfaith dialogue change the perception of the Self vis-à-vis the Other and vice versa. Mutual transformations will often be the enriching yet painful experience of the few who make a personal commitment to dialogue. But if religious education in school is not overruled by majority-dominated agendas and related to community conflicts, it may contribute to personal bonding and mutual change also for many.

Slowly, Norway is getting accustomed to being a multi-religious society. There are several challenges to be faced, both by the religious majority and by the minorities. From the perspective of the faith communities, a major challenge is the tendency on the part of the majority population to equate ‘Norwegian’ with ‘Christian’ (alternatively ‘Christian-humanist’) values. Although it is not always clear what this would imply (considering the wide array of value positions within the Christian majority population), minorities are apprehensive of a public discourse that is sometimes heavily marked by a distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

Increasingly, the interests of the state and those of the national church stand out as different. Whereas the state authorities seem always to focus on ‘integration’ – sometimes on Christian, communitarian premises – church leaders increasingly focus on the autonomy of faith communities and the rights of religious minorities in civil society. There are in fact many indications that the churches will be in the forefront of a process towards more inclusive expressions of national unity – acting not only as representatives of the ‘Christian cultural heritage’, but just as much as defenders of minority rights. In this respect, the regular dialogue between the churches and the Muslim communities in Norway has been an important learning process.