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Some legislation on religious and belief communities

Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l

HRWF (05.12.2016) - The total population of Norway is about 5.2 million. The National Statistics Bureau estimates 74 percent of the population belongs to the Church of Norway.

The National Statistics Bureau reports Christian denominations other than the Church of Norway have 297,000 registered members, or 53 percent of all religious and life-stance registrations excluding the Church of Norway. The Roman Catholic Church is the largest with 96,000 registered members. Pentecostal congregations have approximately 39,000 registered members. Membership in Muslim congregations is 141,000. Muslims are located throughout the country, but the population is concentrated in the Oslo region. Jewish congregations have approximately 750 registered members. There are two official Jewish congregations, one in Oslo and one in Trondheim. Buddhists, Sikhs, and Hindus together constitute less than 5 percent of registered members of religious groups.

The Norwegian Humanist Association is the largest life-stance organization registered with the government. It has a registered membership of 88,000.

Immigrants make up the majority of members of religious groups outside the Church of Norway. Immigrants from Poland and the Philippines have increased Roman Catholic Church membership. Immigrants from Muslim countries, including Iraq, Pakistan, and Somalia, have increased the size of the Muslim community. All of these groups have greater representation in cities than in rural areas.

Registration of faith communities

The registration procedure of faith or belief communities is part of the ***Act relating to faith communities and others*** issued on 13th June 1969.

Relations between official authorities and faith or belief communities take place through regional officials, here called the County Governor (i.e. *Fylkesmann*; there are 19 *fylke*, or regions, a territorial and administrative entity between state and municipality).

The community registers with the County Governor (section 14) and provides the following information:

- Complete name and address of the community
- Basic creed and doctrine
- Information about the organisation, activities and membership
- Names of board members (if there is such)
- Name and sphere of responsibility of each spiritual and administrative leader.

Denominations with congregations in various regions (*fylke*) either register as one entity under one name or let their congregations register separately.

Some communities choose to have one central registration, e.g the Roman Catholic Church or the Methodist Church, whereas others let each local congregation take care of their own registration—two examples being the Muslim communities and the Pentecostal congregations.

Every year before 1st March the faith or belief community is required to send a short written note to the County Governor on its activities during the last calendar year (Section 16). The community is also to notify the authority if there are any changes within the community as regards doctrine or leadership.

Non-registered communities cannot apply for the right to perform wedding ceremonies.

Governmental funding

The government provides financial support to all registered religious and life-stance organizations based on the number of members reported to the government.

Any registered faith or belief community has the right to receive governmental grants, but must apply for these to the County Governor each year before 1st April. The written application must state the number of members in the community on 1st January of the same year. The Norwegian Humanist Association is also funded by the state.

The amount given to faith or belief communities depends on their membership and is calculated by the Department of Justice every year, using government funds allocated to the state church and its membership as its basis. The amount per member is the same for all communities. The amounts are channelled to the faith communities according of the type of registration they have chosen: either to the central entity (i.e. Methodist congregations) or to the local entities registered separately (i.e. Muslim and Pentecostal communities).

The state grant must be used for "religious purposes". The communities must record their expenses and submit an accounting to the County Governor each year before 1st March. The community board or a registered accountant must sign the account.

Oslo diocese pursues court case against Norwegian government

The Diocese is accused of falsifying the records of up to 65,000 Catholics

By Megan Cornwell

The Tablet (01.12.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2fZ35RF> - The Catholic Diocese of Oslo says it is still suing the Norwegian government for "unfair" treatment despite the news this week that it is being fined one million Krone (£115,000) for, according to prosecutors, exaggerating how many members it had in order to receive government subsidies worth millions of pounds.

Oslo prosecutors say the Diocese used telephone directories to look for the names of people – mainly immigrants – who could have originated from Catholic countries, adding them to a list of parishioners attending churches between 2010 and 2014. The Norwegian State subsidises churches per capita.

Oslo's diocesan offices were raided last year as part of the investigation, and the Government wants to claw back 40.6m Krone (£3.5m) in alleged overpayments.

In an earlier statement the Diocese said the decision regarding overpayments was "based on incorrect facts" and "should be declared invalid".

The Diocese also disputes how Church membership is recorded in Norway and says the system discriminates against Catholics. In 2015, the Diocese received subsidies for 80,000 Catholics while it actually had 136,000 members.

A spokesman from Oslo Diocese told The Tablet that many of the new members from former Eastern Bloc countries were reluctant to be included on official State registers because of their experience of State control under Communist rule.

This week a criminal case running parallel to the civil case concluded with the diocese being slapped with a fine of one million Krone (roughly £115,000) and their chief administrative officer, Thuan cong Pham, charged with aggravated fraud. The Bishop of Oslo, Bernt Ivar Eidsvig, who was also under investigation, was not charged.

Although the Vatican will view this as a local Church matter, Pope Francis has called for more transparency when it comes to finances and has condemned corruption of all kinds.

The Norwegian Catholic Church had about 145,000 members at the beginning of the year, according to the national statistical institute SSB.

Norway announces it will ban Islamic veil from schools and universities

- **Education Minister Torbjorn Roe Isaksen is pushing for the burqa ban**
- **Muslim women are rarely seen wearing such veils in Norway**
- **But right-wing government announced plans ahead of elections**
- **Roe Isaksen stressed that the ban would not apply to Islamic headscarves**

AFP (06.10.2016) - <http://dailym.ai/2cVe2Cw> - Norway's right-wing government on Wednesday announced plans to ban the full-face Islamic veil from classrooms and university lecture halls.

Education Minister Torbjorn Roe Isaksen, quoted in the Vart Land newspaper, said the government was seeking 'national regulations prohibiting the full-face veil in schools and universities'.

Muslim women are rarely seen wearing such veils in Norway, let alone in schools. But the issue has come up recently in political debates, with less than a year to go before parliamentary elections.

Several political parties including the opposition Labour Party had expressed support for such a ban.



The Norwegian government hopes to ban the full-face Islamic veil from classrooms and university lecture halls (file photo)

Roe Isaksen stressed that the ban would not apply to Islamic headscarves that leave the face exposed such as the hijab. People should be allowed to express their faith in public in Norway, he said.

'I want a young Christian girl who wears a cross to be able to show it,' he told parliament.

'I want a Jewish boy who wears a kippa to be able to show it. And I do not want a ban on the hijab.'

The Norwegian move comes as several European countries have moved to ban the face-covering niqab and full-body burqa.

Bulgaria on Friday banned women from wearing the full veil in public, and Switzerland's lower house last week narrowly approved a draft bill on a nationwide ban.

In August Germany's interior minister came out in favour of a partial ban.

France and Belgium have both banned the burqa and niqab in public, while French beach resorts sparked international controversy this summer with local bans on the full-body 'burkini' Islamic swimsuit.

A poll published earlier this month showed Britons to be strongly in favour of a burqa ban.

15,000 protest Norwegian Government's removal of children from Christian parents over 'spankings'

By Samuel Smith

The Christian Post (01.02.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1tqscPt> - As many as 15,000 supporters rallied at protests held in eight cities around the globe on Saturday to continue putting pressure on the Norwegian government to release five Romanian Pentecostal children who were removed from their parents based on abuse allegations.

As previously reported by The Christian Post, the five children of Ruth and Marius Bodnariu were removed from their parents' custody last Nov. 16 after the principal from the school the Bodnarius' two daughters attended notified authorities of her concern that the children were being spanked by their parents at home as a form of discipline.

All five children, who range from age nine to four months, were placed into three separate foster homes by the Barnevernet (Norway's child protection services) and their parents have been given limited visitation rights.

As the Bodnarius are scheduled to have their next court hearing in March to determine whether the parents can be reconciled with their children, international supporters of the Bodnariu family held various protests, marches and rallies in Romania, Spain, Poland and Australia on Saturday to continue raising awareness for the family's situation. Five of the protests were held in Romanian cities.

According to a Facebook page set up to raise awareness for the family, an estimated 5,000 protesters gathered for a rally in Sibiu, while an estimated crowd of 4,000 gathered for the protest in Iasi. A combined estimate of over 5,500 gathered for a rally in Sibiu, while an estimated crowd of 4,000 gathered for the protest in Iasi. A combined estimate of over 5,500 gathered for rallies in Bistrita-Nasaud, Cluj-Napoca and Baia Mare.

According to the Facebook page, as many as 400 supporters showed up to the protest in Melbourne, Australia, while as many as 600 showed up to the rally in Castellon, Spain. Despite the large turnouts at other protests, only 20 protesters gathered for a rally held in Warsaw, Poland.

Since the children were removed from their parents' custody, supporters of the Bodnarius have held protests and rallies outside of Norwegian embassies in a number of different countries, including one protest held outside the embassy in Washington, D.C.

This Saturday, supporters in Texas are planning to host a protest rally in Houston, which is home to 10,000 Norwegian citizens, according to the president of the Alliance for Romania's Families, Peter Costea.

Although Costea previously told CP that the Bodnariu case seems to be part of a larger pattern of the Barnevernet targeting the children from migrant families, the national director of Norway's branch of Youth With a Mission Andreas Nordli told CP on Monday that cases like the Bodnarius could be a result of migrant families not being aware of Norway's strict parenting laws.

Norwegian law makes it illegal for parents to spank their children as a disciplinary measure, which some migrant families that move to Norway from other parts of Europe might not realize.

"I have [collaborated] with the child protection locally in Norway, when I served as a pastor. Having migrant families in our church, I can only refer to my personal experience [with the Barnevernet], which back then was very, very good," Nordli explained. "I hear both in this specific case with Romanian family and also cases with Russian [families] and also Lithuanian [families] and [families] from Czech Republic that there have been accusations toward child protective services in Norway but I haven't [seen] it myself."

"Because we have strict laws against physically disciplining your kids, I think a lot of non-Norwegians coming here, they are not aware of the law," Nordli added. "Because of that, that creates the problems, I think. Maybe even the child protection [agencies] in Norway are not good enough explaining to non-Norwegians how our laws are set up."

When the Bodnariu case first gained international attention, the family claimed that their children were seized by the Barnevernet after the principal voiced concern about the family's belief that "God punishes sin."

However, court records shared with Costea indicate that the children were seized because they admitted that they were being spanked by their parents.

Andreas Hegertun, the spokesman for the Norwegian Pentecostal Movement, told CP in a statement on Monday that religious and parental freedoms in Norway are not under attack and believers have the right to believe and do what they want as long as they are not harassing anybody.

"The state of religious liberty is very good in Norway. Every ethnic religious group may worship and raise their children according to their beliefs, as long as they don't violate Norwegian law. In practice this means as long as they don't use violence," Hegertun said. "I have never heard of anyone getting in trouble with the government for any other reason than violence, serious neglect or addictions. In this matter, we as churches strongly agree with our government that violence towards children is not accepted."

"In Norway spanking and other types of corporal punishment is illegal. But this does not mean that all parents that practice these models of parenting have their children removed," Hegertun continued. "A majority of the families that the Barnevernet are in contact with do not have their children removed, most families receive parental courses and advice on how to change their parenting style so that they parent without using corporal punishment or spanking. If the parents see no wrong in using violence or do not want to change, the Barnevernet considers making a case to move the child."
