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Norway and its church are getting a divorce – or maybe they’re just separating.

By Kimberly Winston WWRN (05.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2iYUWNS> - On Jan. 1, the Scandinavian country cut some ties with its Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Norway, rewording the national constitution to change the denomination from “the state’s public religion” to “Norway’s national church.”

The change means the nation of just over 5 million people — about 82 percent of them Evangelical-Lutherans — will still fund the church but will no longer appoint its clergy, who will still be considered civil servants.

And like most divorces, this one could be messy. Norway is one of the least theistic nations in Europe, with 39 percent of Norwegians saying they are atheist or agnostic, according to a poll conducted by a Norwegian newspaper earlier this year.

But Norway also has its own “Bible belt,” along its southwest coast, where much of the base of the country’s two Christian democratic parties is based.

“Such a policy change might inadvertently trigger a culture war,” Jacques Berlinerblau, a Georgetown University professor who studies secularism, told RNS. “Certain anti-secular elements in Europe could point to Norway as an example of the ongoing collapse of Christian culture and Western civilization at the hands of diabolical secularists.”

The move has been in the works since 2012, when the Norwegian Parliament approved the change. It comes just as Germany and other Protestant nations prepare to mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation later this year.

Secularism has been on the rise in Western Europe since the 1960s, with church attendance declining and strict laws on public displays of religion in nations such as France. But the past decade has seen the rise of anti-secular groups and politicians in England, Germany and France.

Meanwhile, some Norwegians feel the divorce is not sharp enough. Kristin Mile, the secretary-general of the Norwegian Humanist Association, told The Local No, an English language Norwegian news site, that the change only muddies the relationship between church and state.

“As long as the constitution says that the Church of Norway is Norway’s national church, and that it should be supported by the state, we still have a state church,” she said.
