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# **NORWAY: An unfair decision against the Jehovah's Witnesses**

## **An unfair decision against the Jehovah's Witnesses**

*On January 27, the County Governor denied to the Witnesses state subsidies they have received for thirty years, creating a danger for all religions.*

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (02.02.2022) – <https://bit.ly/32UHxzn> – In Norway, the Church of Norway, a Lutheran church, is a state church supported by the government with transfers of money proportional to the number of its members. This support is constitutionally guaranteed. However, Section 16 of the Norwegian Constitution states that “all religious and philosophical communities must be supported on an equal footing.” On the basis of this provision, religious minorities also receive state subsidies. The Jehovah’s Witnesses have received them for thirty years.

On January 27, 2022, the County Governor (Statsforvalteren) for Oslo and Viken issued an administrative decision denying to the Jehovah’s Witnesses the state subsidy for the year 2021.

The County Governor explained that he had “received a letter from Rolf Furuli in connection with the exclusion and expulsion of members. The Ministry of Children and Family Affairs has asked the County Governor to assess whether the inquiry from Furuli reveals information of importance for the registration of and state subsidies to the Jehovah’s Witnesses.”

I happen to know Rolf Furuli, if only through email exchanges. He is a professor emeritus of Semitic languages at the University of Oslo and a disfellowshipped Jehovah’s Witness. He is also an active participant in a forum, of which I am also a member, where scholars discuss privately issues about the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Although I disagree with Furuli about almost everything—he even approved what I regard as a bizarre and dangerous Norwegian court ruling “annulling” an ecclesiastical decision where the Jehovah’s Witnesses disfellowshipped a woman—, I appreciate his willingness to keep a dialogue open.

What I appreciate much less is his attempt to use the fact that the Jehovah’s Witnesses suggest that their members do not

associate with those who have been disfellowshipped or have left the congregation as a weapon to exclude them from the Norwegian state subsidies.

Although the decision is open to appeal, Furuli's action so far did succeed. The County Governor denied to the Jehovah's Witnesses the state benefits for 2021 based on the argument that what opponents call the "ostracism" policy violates the duty of religious bodies to respect human rights, the more so because it also applies to minors who have been disfellowshipped for serious moral offenses. The County Governor seems to understand that the policy does not apply to co-habiting relatives. They are simply excluded from the family's religious activities, but otherwise the normal family relationships, including the marital relation between husband and wife, continue.

The County Governor's decision follows the same logic of a 2021 decision of the Court of Ghent, in Belgium, which declared illegal the policies of the Jehovah's Witnesses towards those who have been disfellowshipped or have left their organization. *Bitter Winter* co-organized an international webinar and published several articles criticizing the Ghent decision, noting inter alia that suggesting that members in good standing do not associate with "apostate" ex-members is not a unique practice of the Jehovah's Witnesses but is common in several different religions.

We also noted that courts of law in several countries have recognized that the attitude of the Jehovah's Witnesses derives from their interpretation of the Bible with the consequence that, in the words of a 2020 decision by the Administrative Court of Berlin, it is protected by "freedom of religion, the separation of Church and state, and the right of religious associations to self-determination." How the Jehovah's Witnesses decide to "exercise their constitutionally guaranteed right to self-determination," the court said, is

something the state should not interfere with. Disfellowshipping policies and the so called "ostracism" are "internal church measures." As the Court of Appeal of Tennessee stated in 2007, confirming previous American case law, "shunning is a part of the Jehovah's Witnesses belief system. Individuals who choose to join the Church voluntarily accept the governance of the Church and subject themselves to being shunned if they are disfellowshipped."

Of course, if "internal church measures" become a ground for denying to the Jehovah's Witnesses the same treatment other religious organizations enjoy in Norway, other religious minorities are also at risk. This explain the attitudes of Christian experts and media in Norway that, while reiterating that they do not share the theology nor the interpretation of the Bible of the Jehovah's Witnesses, protested the decision of the County Governor as dangerous for all religions.

The daily newspaper *Vårt Land* interview Dag Øistein Endsjø, a professor of Religious studies at the University of Oslo, who stated that the ruling "can have consequences for a whole range of other faiths." He also stated that he was unpersuaded by the County Governor's human rights arguments, noting that they may perhaps be taken in consideration with respect to minors involved in the "shunning" policy but not enough evidence has been offered that this disrupts the social networks of the minor, and at any rate a principle of balance of interests should be respected. Endsjø also noted that it is undisputed that those who disagree with the policy can freely leave the Jehovah's Witnesses.

The editor-in-chief of the historical Norwegian Christian daily *Dagen*, Vebjørn Selbekk, under the eloquent title "Now Comes the Religious Taste Police," wrote that "the state support for religious communities is not gentle gifts from the public sector, but a compensation for the constitutional financial support that the state gives to the Church of Norway... But now a group of Norwegians has been deprived of

that right.”

Selbekk noted that the authorities give the impression “to act as a religious taste police and then punish religious communities financially.” This time is the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the journalist wrote, “but who will be the next to be exposed to this type of treatment? It is not difficult to imagine that other denominations with a doctrine and practice that is disputed in an increasingly secular society will also be affected. What about the many free churches that do not want to marry same-sex couples? ... Or what about the Catholic Church, which does not accept female priests? When will the first proposals come to take away state aid from them due to inequality?”

Selbekk noted the irony that the “decision to punish the Jehovah’s Witnesses financially came on Holocaust Day,” when many throughout the world pay homage to the Jehovah’s Witnesses killed in Nazi concentration camps, and others protest their persecution today in Russia.

Hopefully, the County Governor’s decision will be reversed on appeal. If not, religious liberty in Norway—of all communities, not the Jehovah’s Witnesses only—will be seriously affected.

*Photo : Two Jehovah’s Witnesses witnessing to a Sami woman in Norway. Source: jw.org.*

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**Massimo Introvigne** (born June 14, 1955 in Rome) is an Italian sociologist of religions. He is the founder and managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), an international network of scholars who study new religious movements. Introvigne is the author of some 70 books and more than 100 articles in the field of sociology of religion. He was the main author of the *Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia* (Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy). He is a member of

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**Further reading about FORB in Norway on HRWF website**

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