

Majority church and immigration: A Norwegian case study

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The complex phenomenon of international migration, be it voluntary or forced, is often discussed in terms of the push and pull factors that make people uproot from their homes and resettle elsewhere. Common push factors are economic insecurity, political instability, persecution, conflict or war. Considered from this perspective, migration is seen as an attempt to escape from difficult living conditions, social problems or perceived injustice. Pull factors are the opposite: opportunities in terms of economic security, education, political stability, freedom or relative peace. But migrating is not only about push and pull factors. Settling in a new place represents challenges both for the migrant and for the countries and communities they settle into. Governments struggle to find appropriate policies on both immigration and integration. Similarly, civil society organisations, community groups and individuals are challenged morally and practically. How should they respond when strangers knock on the doors of their homes or present themselves at national borders? How should they handle political conflicts related to socio-economic insecurity and cultural and religious differences?

I wish to explore in this essay some religious responses to immigration, especially how the relationship between religion and immigration is interpreted in a Northern European context. I specifically describe and analyse how the Church of Norway – the Lutheran majority church in Norway – has interpreted and responded to immigration and its effects on Norwegian society over the last two decades. I will do so by examining official church documents and by discussing ways in which the church positions itself in relation to the

government and its policies on the one hand, and immigrants and their representatives on the other.

My focus will be on how this church seeks to shape the popular understanding of immigration and to inform the public debate. I will argue that immigration has generated a reflective process on religion and immigration in the Church of Norway and that immigration in this way challenges the religious and socio-political self-understanding of this majority church. I will also show that despite its clear national identity, there is a strong cosmopolitan emphasis in the church's approach to immigration.

State, society and migration

Norway is a product of national romanticism and political nationalism. Political independence was first declared through the adoption of the national constitution of May 17, 1814. This year saw the end of the dual monarchy of Denmark-Norway that had lasted for almost 400 years and a new relationship between the ethnic community (Norwegian people) and political borders (the Norwegian state). Although a union with Sweden was established the same year, national sentiments remained strong. Then, in 1905, Norway severed political ties with its neighbour to the east and presented itself to the world as an independent nation state. Situated in the very northern part of Europe and with a nationalist self-understanding as the country where Norwegians live and belong, Norway and Norwegian society came to be understood by (most of) its inhabitants as distinct and separated from other countries and the outside world. Accordingly, the notion of Norway as a homogenous country of, and for, Norwegians has deep roots and a long tradition in Norwegian culture and society, and is part of social life and the public debate even today.

However, the history of Norway cannot be reduced to a one-dimensional narrative of seclusion, unity and homogeneity. The very facts of its political independence remind us that

for five out of the last six centuries Norway has been politically integrated with other countries: Denmark and Sweden. International trade and shipping, as well as a remarkably high number of Norwegian missionaries abroad, add to the picture of a country closely integrated into a wider international context. In fact, the Norwegian constitution draws heavily on the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and the ideas of the French Revolution (1789). In addition, the more recent oil discoveries and the era of globalization have undoubtedly increased Norway's participation in the international exchange of information and ideas, the global economy and related migration patterns. This has resulted in a profound contrast between the notion of Norway as distinct from the rest of the world and the more realistic understanding of Norway as an integrated part of a global, international order.

The phenomenon of migration precedes national borders and the topic of migration is not new in Norway. Thousands of Norwegians migrated to the USA in the 19th century, and during World War II the Norwegian royal family, politicians, members of the resistance and others sought refuge in Sweden, the United Kingdom, Canada or the USA. In the period after World War II, the main migration flow has been the other way. A net emigration out of Norway has turned into net immigration into the country. Swedish and other Scandinavian immigrants have always been an important group, but have close cultural ties with Norway and integrate with relative ease into Norwegian society. For such reasons, the group more often referred to in discussions about immigration into Norway are the non-European or non-Western immigrants, for instance the first Pakistani work immigrants who came in the 70s and later arrivals from Vietnam, the Horn of Africa, the Balkans etc.¹

Immigration into Norway is restricted and most non-Norwegian citizens need formal permission to settle in the country. Yet there are important exceptions. Norway has a shared

labour market with the other Nordic countries and, although not a member of the European Union, Norway is part of the common European labour market, as well as the Schengen agreement on free travel within several European countries. Accordingly, as long as they can provide for themselves, most EU citizens can travel freely to Norway. In addition, experts and other professionals in demand in Norway can seek residency based on their job opportunities in the country, and Norway receives (an admittedly limited number of) refugees and asylum seekers (as well as their family members) from countries in war and conflict. Finally, Norway has its share of unauthorised or illegal immigration.

One consequence of these trends is that the cultural, ethnic and religious mosaic of Norwegian society is changing.² The growing cultural and religious pluralism is expressed through, for example, an increased number of immigrant organizations and faith communities. It is estimated that about 60 % of the non-Western immigrants to Norway have a Christian identity³, but the Muslim identity of many migrants is more visible in social life and seems to generate more public and political debates.

The majority ethnic Norwegian population has reacted to these changes in different ways. The social-liberal elite and upper middle class have widely embraced the new multicultural society and claimed it to be partly a reality and fact of life, and partly a blessing that should be promoted and celebrated. In recent years, sceptics of multicultural trends in Norway have, however, gained ground.⁴ The right-wing Progress Party has attracted support from many by voicing immigration scepticism and critiquing the present immigration policies. There have also been notable cases of racism. The terrorist attacks of July 22, 2011 were an extreme expression of opposition to the perceived multiculturalist policies of the Norwegian government.

Church and immigration

The Lutheran Church of Norway is the established majority church in Norway with strong ties to both the Norwegian state and the Norwegian people. Approximately three-quarters of the population are members of this church, and traditionally clergy have been civil servants. Until 2012 the bishops were appointed by the government minister of church affairs.

The Church of Norway's self-understanding is that it has a mission to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ and work for compassion and justice in the world.⁵ Put differently, the church is called to do two things: to evangelize and to do diaconal (social) work. To fulfil this mission, the church has a dual hierarchical organisation: an episcopal structure going from the local pastors to the bishops on the one hand, and a democratic, synodical structure from the local parish council to the national General Synod of the church on the other hand. This makes the church rooted in and oriented towards Norwegian society and the Norwegian people, and gives it a pronounced national character.

The Church of Norway's engagement with immigration can be traced back to the increased labour immigration of the 1970s, and the twofold mission to evangelize and to do diaconal work can be seen also in relation to immigrants. Partly they have been regarded as a mission field and partly they have been seen as people in need. By and large, the attitude has been positive and welcoming, and the church partners with Christian non-governmental organisations in its work towards immigrants.⁶ One such partner is the ecumenical organization Christian Intercultural Work (*Kristent Interkulturelt Arbeid, KIA*) that organises women's groups, multicultural gospel choirs, camps, seminars, courses, etc. Another example is a project organized by the Norwegian Christian Council called Church network for the integration of refugees and immigrants (*Kirkelig nettverk for integrering av flyktninger og innvandrere, Flyktningennettverket*). This project aims at strengthening the churches'

involvement with refugees and immigrants in Norway and organizes courses, joint discussions and information sharing between various churches and local congregations, as well as government authorities and other actors. Resources for increased integration and tools for working in multicultural study groups have also been developed in an ecumenical partnership.⁷

Cosmopolitanism and social capital

The Church of Norway's various responses to immigration may be considered through two particularly relevant argumentative discourses. Firstly, a cosmopolitan discourse that emphasises the human worth and dignity of every human being, and secondly a discourse of integration that focuses on how immigrants meet, and are met by, the society they settle into.

Kwame Anthony Appiah has explained cosmopolitanism as two intertwining strands:

One is the idea that we have obligations to others that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even the formal ties of shared citizenship. The other is that we take seriously the value not just of human life, but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance.⁸

A cosmopolitan discourse is at play when churches make international law and human rights a key concern in regards to immigration. One example of this can be found in a statement given by the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME), an ecumenical agency on migration and integration, asylum and refugees, and against racism and discrimination in Europe. The CCME argues that "[f]rom a Christian point of view every human being is created in the image of God. Therefore, human rights and dignity are non-negotiable regardless of the legal status of persons".⁹ This kind of statement represents a distinct

Christian and theological terminology in a context where other terms such as refugees, migrants, undocumented persons etc. are contested and at times dehumanising.¹⁰ The language and perspective draws on, and represents, the distinctive contribution theology and churches can make to the discussion on migration,¹¹ but also indicates how the cosmopolitan discourse is affiliated with the human rights discourse.¹² Both of these discourses adopt a universal approach and downplay, or outright reject, the political or moral relevance of national, ethnic, political or religious borders and divisions. People are first and foremost human beings, and the current international order is considered secondary to this. Cosmopolitanism thus contrasts with a nationalist stance that places strong emphasis on national, political borders and considers the existence of such borders the premise for the immigration debate.

This distinction between cosmopolitan and nationalist discourses seems especially relevant in the case of the Church of Norway. Being a church that draws on the Biblical notion of all human beings being created by God and in his image (Genesis 1), there are obvious universal elements in its values and world view. On the other hand, its identity is clearly national and its affiliation with a particular national community evident. Consequently, the tension between nationalism and cosmopolitanism cannot be placed simply outside the church, but is an integral part of the church's self-understanding.

While the cosmopolitan discourse is of special relevance to international migration, the concept of integration relates more closely to the resettlement process and the relationship between immigrants and the wider society into which they move. The concept of *social capital* is a key concept in this regard. This refers to the resources migrants bring with them and how they can utilise these resources when they settle in a new place, or in Robert D. Putnam's definition: "features of social life – networks, norms, and trust – that enable

participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives”.¹³ Putnam argues that social capital has two dimensions: *bridging* and *bonding*. When social capital is used to make links with groups other than one’s own, bridges are built across perceived divides. This is the process of bridging. When social capital is used primarily to make links between people within the same group, it is a process of bonding.

Immigration and integration

The ambition to facilitate this kind of bridging across social, cultural and ethnic divides is quite explicit in public statements from the Church of Norway. In a comprehensive document on the church’s identity and mission, the church states: “When dealing with immigration in Norwegian society the Church of Norway wants to be a church where people can find a place to belong irrespective of ethnicity or language”.¹⁴ Similarly, the diaconal work of the church is guided by a vision to create inclusive communities through congregations that are open and inclusive.¹⁵

In such statements the Church of Norway comes across as a church with a positive attitude of hospitality and benevolence towards immigrants, with a commitment to contribute to immigrants’ integration in Norwegian society at large and to facilitate bridging and bonding in local congregations of the church.¹⁶ It is also noteworthy how a positive attitude to cultural and ethnic pluralism refers not only to the wider society, but to the church itself. The church states: “Based on one baptism and one faith the Church of Norway is an equal fellowship of men and women, old and young...”.¹⁷ Theologically the church is not limited to one ethnic group, but unites diversity on the basis of faith. In this way, and adopting an explicitly cosmopolitan discourse, the Church of Norway detaches its self-understanding from a (too) nationalist discourse.

Immigration has, however, resulted in an increased number of migrant churches in Norwegian society. Often they are established on an ethnic basis, indicating that they are important arenas for bonding between members of these ethnic groups.¹⁸ This represents a challenge to the Church of Norway as it strives to become a multi-ethnic church. In its response to a government white paper on integration,¹⁹ the Church of Norway Council on International and Ecumenical Relations states the church:

... will work systematically at including Christian immigrants in Norwegian congregations, increase contact locally and nationally between the Church of Norway and migrant congregations, and at developing strategies to increase the recruitment of immigrants to positions and appointments in the Church of Norway.²⁰

This is in line with the recommendations of the government report. In fact, the values and ideals stated in the white paper (democracy, rule of law, human rights, gender equality, freedom of speech, freedom of religion etc.) are fully supported by the council. There seems, however, to be a gap between these stated attitudes and intentions on the one hand, and local congregational life on the other. Although local clergy and church members have made a range of practical arrangements to integrate immigrants into various activities in the congregations, this has turned out to be difficult in practice.

In summary, there seems to be an important cosmopolitan dimension to the church's approach to immigration. The equal worth and value of every human being is emphasised and is important to the understanding of both human beings and the Christian community. Integration is perceived as a goal, but also a challenge. Doubts are raised about the ability of the church to facilitate bridging across ethnic divisions in the work of the church.

The church and immigration policies

The church statements on integration indicate how the Church of Norway participates actively in the public exchange on these issues. To some extent church statements seem to reflect a fundamental consensus between church and state and a relatively harmonious relationship between the two. As explained, the church has a long history of being a state church with close ties to the majority ethnic group in the Norway. Over the last century, however, the ties between the Church of Norway and the Norwegian government have been gradually weakened. Through a compromise between all the political parties in parliament in 2012 the status of the Church of Norway as a state church was formally abandoned. This allows the church to see itself more as a non-governmental organisation (NGO) than part of the official state bureaucracy, although the state and local municipalities continue to give extensive financial support to the church.

This kind of financial links between the government and other organisations or institutions, both in the private and voluntary sectors, is common in Norway and is an expression of a generous welfare state policy. Accordingly, such government ties are not something peculiar to the church or other religious bodies. Though critical analysis of this arrangement has been offered, this support is largely evaluated positively in the public debate. Against the claim that close ties inhibit a critical stance and civil society's role as a government watchdog, the argument is made that there is room for criticism in these relations and that they facilitate an on-going dialogue between the government and civil society groups. In other words, government funding does not necessarily mute criticism. This also applies to the Church of Norway and on several occasions church officials have in fact publicly criticised the Norwegian government.

Church participation in public debates gives witness to both the national and public role of the church as well as its relative independence from the state and government. However, the church can, and does, participate in these public debates in different ways. On several occasions the Church of Norway has voiced concern about the situation of refugees and asylum seekers in Norway. This involvement is presented by the church as an engagement “for a more generous and more humane asylum and refugee policy”, as this is “value politics and concerns human dignity”.²¹ Two different incidents illustrate the church’s response to these issues.

In 2012 a white paper *Report to the Parliament No. 27 (2011-2012) Children on the run [Barn på flukt]*²² stated that the practise of returning asylum seeking children who have been in Norway for a long period, is too strict considering the intention of the law. The child’s interest and the Convention on the Rights of the Child should be given increased weight when considering their cases. In January 2012 the bishops responded to the white paper by participating in a country wide demonstration in support for these children. Thereafter, the General Synod adopted a statement saying that: “In the case that the law is an obstacle to a more humane asylum policy, we encourage Parliament to change the law”.²³ The General Synod also stated that it is worried about “the development of Norwegian asylum policies” and is “in particular concerned about the approximately 450 children living as undocumented immigrants in Norway”.²⁴ The following year, in the beginning of 2013, the High Court decided that two nine year olds, Verona Delic (from Bosnia) and Mahdi Shabazi (from Iran), could be deported from Norway. Following this verdict the public service broadcaster NRK reported that all bishops were disappointed and the meeting of bishops stated in February 2012 that “... it is, from a humanitarian point of view, unacceptable to return children who in fact have lived in Norway for several years”.²⁵

The underlying premise for these responses is clearly cosmopolitan. It is the concern for the dignity and rights of all human beings that brings the representatives of the church to challenge government policies and court decisions. By addressing decisions made by politicians and suggesting alternative policies for implementation the church engages in the public debate. When the church criticizes and suggests policy measures to be implemented, it seeks to influence public policy making. This can be considered a way of practicing public or political theology. If the church goes further, criticizing power, denouncing exploitation, and speaking out against injustice, the church's public involvement can be described as a way of doing prophetic theology. Church statements are then used to further radical political change along the lines of the Old Testament prophets.

The practice of political theology in the public discourse by a Lutheran church contrasts with the political passivity and obedience towards civil authorities that at times is associated with the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms. Luther argued that God rules in the world in two different ways – through the spiritual and the worldly realms. The church represents the first and preaches the good news about salvation. The civil authorities represent the other and govern through their political powers. This doctrine has been interpreted as limiting the church's role with regard to the political realm, but WWII inspired a profound reassessment of this Lutheran stance towards the state and civil authorities. In the Norwegian context, then-bishop of Oslo Eivind Berggrav famously argued that the Two Kingdom-doctrine implies that both church and state are accountable to God as the higher authority.²⁶ In cases where the political authorities do not abide by God's will, it becomes the task of the church to remind the government and its politicians of the standards they must conform to. Thus, Berggrav offered a theological understanding of the relationship between church and state that has remained important to the Church of Norway. Contemporary Lutheran theology

has similarly distanced itself from the quietistic interpretation of the two kingdom doctrine and underlined the political nature of Christian love and its continued public relevance even in a (post-)secular setting.²⁷

Conclusion

The Church of Norway has responded to immigration in a number of different ways: as a call to preach and to serve, in words and deeds, at the national level as well as the local level of church and society. In this chapter I have examined some of the public statements made by church officials on immigration, and both consistencies and contradictions have emerged.

In its encounter with immigrants the church acknowledges its position as a majority institution, being part of and representing the Norwegian establishment and the largest ethnic and religious group in the country. This is in contrast to the minority situation many immigrants in Norway find themselves in. The church has also made inclusion into the church an explicit aim in a manner similar to the state's policy of integrating immigrants into Norwegian society. The Church of Norway programmatically states the intention and vision of being an inclusive church for all, irrespective of ethnicity, culture, and other characteristics. On several occasions, the Church of Norway has expressed this interpretation of immigration in public, seeking to shape both the popular understanding of immigration and to inform the public debate. The ability to put this vision into practice seems, however, limited. Although there is a strong element of cosmopolitanism in the church's approach to the issue of refugees and asylum seekers, there seems to be less of an emphasis on their social capital and potential contribution to Norwegian society. The church largely seems to remain an arena for ethnic bonding rather than ethnic bridging.

The church's response to immigration is also marked by its public role. Church officials engage in public theology in a language accessible to a largely secular public, but

also inform and try to shape the public debate. By emphasising how every human being is created in the image of God, the Church of Norway both makes its own religious resources explicit and challenges an otherwise frequently dehumanizing public rhetoric. On some of the more controversial issues it explicitly criticises current policies and suggests alternative political choices. The cosmopolitan notion that humans are first and foremost human beings, not citizens of particular countries, and the related rejection of national borders is, however, not expressed through a vision of an alternative: the borderless, global community. The church proclaims human rights and is a witness of cosmopolitanism, but does not challenge the status quo in any radical way. As this prophetic task can be considered an important part of the Christian contribution in the public sphere, this is a dimension of the church's response to immigration that could be strengthened.

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¹² Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998) and Seyla Benhabib, *The Rights of Others. Aliens, Residents, and Citizens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹³ Robert D. Putnam, "Tuning in, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America," *Political Science & Politics* 28, No. 4 (1995):664-665; see also *Bowling Alone. The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, A Touchstone Book (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

¹⁴ Church of Norway Council, *The Church of Norway's Identity and Mission: Statement from the Church Synod 2004 [Den norske kirkes iIdentitet og oppdrag: Uttalelse fra Kirkemøtet 2004]:16-17*

¹⁵ *Church of Norway Plan for Diakonia* (Oslo: Church of Norway, National Council, 2009):16

¹⁶ The Church of Norway's statements on immigration seem largely to deal with this as an issue of integration, and less with the complex root causes of international migration. This might explain why the issue is often treated as an issue of benevolence and hospitality (Arthur Sutherland, *I Was a Stranger. A Christian Theology of Hospitality* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006).; Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness Amid Moral Diversity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006)., rather than for example justice (Tisha Rajendra, "Justice, Not Benevolence: Catholic Social Thought, Migration Theory, and the Rights of Migrants," *Political Theology* 15, no. 4 (2014).; Ched Myers and Matthew Colwell, *Our God Is Undocumented. Biblical Faith and Immigrant Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012).

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²¹ <https://kirken.no/nb-NO/om-kirken/slik-styres-kirken/mellomkirkelig-rad/okumenikk-og-kirkesamarbeid/religionsdialog/asyl--og-innvandringsengasjement/> , accessed 16.02.18.

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²³ https://kirken.no/globalassets/kirken.no/om-kirken/slik-styres-kirken/kirkemotet/2012/km_2012_uttalelse_norsk_asylpolitikk.pdf , accessed 19.02.18.

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