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Separation of Religion or Belief and State

NORWAY – IS RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE POSSIBLE AT A PARISH LEVEL

Review: *Cooperation Instead of Religious Dialogue*, by Lorenz Khazaleh, publication for CULCOM, Cultural Complexity in the new Norway, an inter-disciplinary research program at the University of Oslo, Norway. This is an interview Kjersti Borsum gave on her Master's thesis. It questions the distance between the elites participating in dialogue and the grassroots level.

Excerpts: From the Master's thesis of Kjersti Borsum:

“Religious dialogue has become a popular tool for preventing conflict in Norway. Yet this type of dialogue is a more sensitive subject to the Church of Norway than they outwardly reveal – there is a great distance between the **elites** participating in the dialogue and the **grassroots** level, the CULCOM scholar, Kjersti Borsum points out in her Master's thesis.”

“The resistance to engage in religious dialogue sits deep.”

“People could spend several years of their lives sitting together and discussing their beliefs, and what God means to them. This is very personal for believers and many of the grassroots members of the congregation think such conversations are difficult and tiresome. They do not want to talk about their beliefs, but they want to be good neighbors.”

“Well, it has been my experience that people usually want to talk about the **practical matters**, rather than differences in faith and doctrine.”

“The resistance also has to do with power and politics. In her thesis, Borsum demonstrates that the religious dialogue leads to changes in the political landscape. The dialogue forums have become arenas for political influence in which new types of rulers have been cultivated – formal and informal religious spokespeople.”

COOPERATION INSTEAD OF RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

By Lorenz Khazaleh, CULCOM, Cultural Complexity in the New Norway

Religious dialogue has become a popular tool for preventing conflict in Norway. Yet this type of dialogue is a more sensitive subject to the Church of Norway than they outwardly reveal. - There is a great distance between the elites participating in the dialogue and the grassroots level, the CULCOM scholar, Kjersti Børsum, points out in her Master's thesis.

Kjersti Børsum has followed the establishment of an inter-religious dialogue forum in two municipalities. In recent years, an increasing number of such forums have been established. International and national conflicts have increasingly been interpreted as being religious conflicts, and, based on this fact, she shows that [religious dialogue](#) appears to be the only solution.

From being a spiritual activity in which scholars discussed theological questions, religious dialogue has become a political tool for creating harmony in society. And it looks like this is working: the longstanding tradition of religious dialogue in Norway is viewed by many as being the most important reason for why the caricature controversy was less dramatic in Norway than in Denmark.

But how do believers in the local congregations feel about this dialogue? Kjersti Børsum became interested in this issue and decided to write her Master's thesis about the religious dialogue as it is viewed from the grassroots level.

“The resistance to engaging in religious dialogue sits deep”

Already during an early phase of the fieldwork, the researcher discovered that the subject was more volatile than one might think. A born-again Christian became loudly aggressive when she revealed that she was writing a thesis about religious dialogue. “How dare you! That is a shame,” he said. The founding meeting of the Council on Faith and Philosophy of Life in “the little town”, one of the two municipalities, was dramatic. Representatives from the Church of Norway tried to sabotage the meeting. They insisted that the council was too formally organized and in spite of having two years of preliminary work, it had failed to obtain a final assessment of the issue in their parish councils. “The resistance to having a religious dialogue,” she writes in the thesis “is deeply rooted in local congregations,”

-I encountered a great deal of resistance in the congregations. Several people were against having inter-religious dialogue, she says.

-But they were interested in speaking with believers from other religions. It is the inter-religious dialogue they are against – and this pertains to both Christians and Muslims, she adds.

-What's the difference?

-The difference is the theological conversation. The religious dialogue is actually a theological conversation, it is spiritual self-development. People could spend several years of their lives sitting together and discussing their beliefs, and what God means to them. This is very personal for believers and many of the grassroots members of the congregation think such conversations are difficult and tiresome. They do not want to talk about their beliefs, but they want to be good neighbors.

-So there is too much talk about religion when so many people are focused on practical matters?

- Yes, what local people are asking for are solutions to important practical questions. For example, the National Health Service wonders how they should handle the deceased, since there are different traditions in different religious communities. This is a vital question because it has to do with whether the deceased get into heaven or not. For example, followers of the Bahai religion must be buried a certain distance from the places where they passed away.

-So does this mean that a number of conflicts might disappear when focus is directed toward such practical matters?

- Well, it has been my experience that people usually wanted to talk about the practical matters, rather than differences in faith and doctrine.

New Religious Rulers

The resistance also has to do with power and politics. In her thesis, Børsum demonstrates that the religious dialogue leads to changes in the political landscape. The dialogue forums have become arenas for political influence in which new types of rulers have been cultivated – formal and informal religious spokespeople.

- [The Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities](#) has become a consultative body for the government, and the local Faith and Life Stance Councils or dialogue forums have become consultative bodies for local governments. They are in the process of taking over the role of the immigrant councils as the mouthpiece for minority communities. Here, there are a number of individual persons who acquire real political influence, and who are not democratically elected – because there is no tradition for that in many religious societies.

It is not just the secular immigrant councils that have lost power, but also the Church of Norway at the local level:

- I interpret the resistance to the founding meeting as an indicator of the Church of Norway's sense that its local political power was being threatened. Until now, the local authorities used the local Church council (which consists of all of the parish councils) as the consultative and cooperative body. The representatives of the Church realized that the politicians would most likely use the dialogue council as the consultative body from then on.

“The church of the majority has to put forth greater effort than merely passing a measure for accepting the minority religions as equal partners,” says Børsum.

-You feel good being the majority when you say to the minority, “We will now have dialogue”, especially when the minority representatives cannot speak Norwegian fluently. Still, now you can meet Norwegian Muslims, Sikhs, and others who are fluent in the Norwegian language and culture. They are second or third generation immigrants, and call themselves – and justifiably so – Norwegians.

-They are considered to be a threat?

-Yes, and it was quite a shock to the local state church parishes. Dialogue should take place between equal partners, yet it is clear that there can never be a genuinely equal relationship between the minority community and the majority community, which represents 80% of the population.

- Having faith in dialogue is the most important thing

-You draft a rather dismal picture of the religious dialogue...?

-No, I don't think so. I think we have to talk about the fact that for the majority may experience meeting competent representatives from the minority community as a threat. There must also be room to reflect on the fact that dialogue forums lead to a democracy deficit, as well as on whether some groups gain political influence and power at the expense of other groups, for example, secular groups with minority backgrounds.

- I conclude that it is actually irrelevant to “prove” whether inter-religious dialogue functions to promote community and prevent conflict or not. When you develop positive images of the future and believe that it is possible to live side-by-side despite religious differences, then you achieve hope and this hope generates drive. Negative images become self-fulfilling, but that becomes positive as well. I base this on [David Harvey’s idea](#) about how utopian images of the future generate political energy – as a counterbalance to dystopian resignation.

- *Is religious dialogue a form of therapy?*

- I would rather say it is an effective method for getting out of an otherwise fixed situation.

-*Obligatory question: What is cultural complexity?*

-Cultural complexity in a society is the problem and the solution at the same time. There is no such thing as a society that is not culturally complex; there are continually divisive opinions. This potential for conflict creates a dynamic that moves society. It is arduous and can be experienced as being painful, but at the same time, it is decisive for a society to be able to survive and further develop.

-*Any blank spots, or topics that should be more thoroughly researched?*

-How values manifest themselves in the behavior of both the minority and majority community. An exciting field is the growth of religious arenas of power versus secular arenas of power within minority communities.

Cooperation Instead of Religious Dialogue?

<http://www.culcom.uio.no/english/news/2009/borsum.html>

The History of Interfaith Dialogue in Norway is a history of dialogue from 1739 up to 1998 and the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief. www.oslocoalition.org.

[*The History of Interfaith Dialog in Norway*](#)

The Tandem Project is a non-governmental organization (NGO) founded in 1986 to build understanding, tolerance and respect for diversity, and to prevent discrimination in matters relating to freedom of religion or belief. The Tandem Project has sponsored multiple conferences, curricula, reference materials and programs on Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights – Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion - and 1981 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.

