

## CHAPTER 15

# Pillars or Perils of Society?

## Exploring the Role of Religion in the COVID-19 Pandemic in Norway

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### Abstract

This chapter examines the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and religious communities, beliefs, and behaviours in Norway. The chapter briefly introduces the role of religion in Norwegian society prior to the pandemic, before tracking and assessing the trajectory of the pandemic and the fallout of the public health emergency measures introduced to contain the spread of the virus. Identifying three distinctive phases to these measures, the chapter points to numerous instances where religious communities were directly affected and examines their aftereffects.

### Introduction

Writing in September 2020, in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic, five American sociologists identified what they saw as the

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‘emerging research agenda for studying religion and the COVID-19 pandemic’ in an editorial note in *Sociology of Religion* (Baker et al. 2020). Discussing the emerging research frontier in the study of religion, politics and law, the note highlighted what was characterised as ‘aggressive calls for religious exemptions for church gatherings’, observing that:

there appears to be a resonance between those who agitate for re-opening the churches and those who agitate for re-opening the economy—a Christian libertarian affinity that insists open churches and businesses are what is needed to keep America strong. (Baker et al. 2020, 366)

Setting this diagnosis, the note effectively framed the interrelationship between COVID-19 and religion within a deeply entrenched and highly politicised division in the field of law and religion, between defenders and critics of the modern notion of religious freedom. Defenders tend to portray its promotion as vital, because ‘religious repression is real and widespread. In great numbers, all over the world, human beings are killed, tortured, imprisoned, detained, robbed of their property, deprived of their houses of worship, and denied jobs, economic opportunities, and positions in public service on account of their religion’ (Philpott and Shah 2016, 394–95). According to the critical view, however, ‘indiscriminately promoting religious freedom as the solution may exacerbate the very divisions that plague the countries and communities cited most frequently as falling short in measures of religious freedom’ (Sullivan et al. 2015, 3).

The interrelationship between law and religion as it played out in the COVID-19 pandemic represents an opportunity to explore which version most closely aligns with the available evidence: were religious communities repressed during the pandemic and, if so, because of their religion? And, if so, was more religious freedom the antidote to this repression? Or were already-entrenched divisions between communities exacerbated by calls for exemptions in the name of religious freedom?

Arguably, none of these propositions can be examined in the abstract, general sense indicated by the quotes above. Both law and religion, despite their global reach and the considerable interchange of doctrinal and regulatory techniques and modes of reasoning across and beyond international borders, are fiercely contextual enterprises, where generalisations and simplifications soon fall apart as specific

cases and settings are included in the analysis. Seeking to evade such simplifications, this chapter examines the ways in which Norwegian authorities managed the COVID-19 pandemic, with a particular emphasis on the ways in which legal and other regulatory measures affected religion, widely put – from individual belief and practice to organisational adaptation and change. The examination will seek to detect the extent to which the divisions observable in the field of law and religion regarding the salience and relevance of religious freedom can be found in the Norwegian case.

### Setting the Context

In order to contextualise the ways in which the multitude of legal, political, and social measures put in place in order to mitigate and control the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic affected religion in Norway, a brief note on the sociopolitical role of religion in Norwegian society is in order. The role of religion in Norway is decisively affected by three intersecting and interrelated trends. First, the Church of Norway, as a constitutionally established evangelical Lutheran church,<sup>1</sup> is dominant in terms of membership (approximately 62.6 per cent of the population), and in terms of its role as a custodian of Norwegian cultural heritage, representing the concrete manifestation of what is frequently characterised as 1,000 years of Christian heritage. Simultaneously, however, the church has seen its membership steadily decline for several decades, and burials, marriages, confirmation ceremonies, and attendance at church services are all decreasing, albeit at different paces.<sup>2</sup>

Second, the number and size of organised, registered religious communities outside the Church of Norway has never been higher, and is steadily increasing every year, making up approximately 13.6 per cent of the population. While more than half of these communities are Christian denominations, the other half is increasingly diverse, with Muslim communities amounting to approximately 190,000 members and the Humanist association at 160,000.<sup>3</sup> Third, and strongly related to the dwindling numbers of the Church of Norway, the group of religiously unaffiliated – or ‘nones’ – is growing steadily, in line with similar trends observed in other European countries. The unaffiliated presently account for well over 20 per cent of the population, a figure that is likely to increase as those leaving the Church of Norway are more

likely to become unaffiliated than they are to join another religious community.<sup>4</sup> Importantly, self-reported levels of non-belief are considerably higher, at 51 per cent,<sup>5</sup> indicating that a substantial number of present members of religious communities, both in the Church of Norway and elsewhere, are unbelieving and therefore likely to either leave themselves, or to raise their children non-religiously, conforming to the patterns of ‘fuzzy fidelity’ identified by David Voas (Voas 2009).

These intersecting demographic trends can be traced back to at least the late 1970s and early 1980s, and have had profound effects on the social, political, and legal role of religion in Norwegian society, which has shifted substantively away from the hegemony of the Church of Norway to a far more diverse and multidimensional picture, in which the influence and importance of religion, organised or otherwise, has diminished considerably for most parts of the population.

### Legal Aspects

Norway is a constitutional monarchy, with the oldest constitution in Europe still in force. The country was among the founders of the United Nations and the Council of Europe, and all the major international human rights conventions have been incorporated wholesale into the legal framework through the 1999 Human Rights Act. Following the introduction of this Act, reviewing the human rights implications of legal decisions has become fully integrated in the Norwegian legislative process. Norwegian legal culture does not have a tradition of judicial activism, nor do communities appear to seek redress through world regional arbitration courts, which would seem to go against Propositions 6 and 7 in the introduction to this volume, which postulate that weak judicial activism in the area of religious freedom would lead to increased reliance on world regional arbitration courts.

Despite the decline in religious membership, practice and belief, Norwegian law and policy on religion has long been dictated by a cross-political consensus<sup>6</sup> in favour of an ‘actively supportive’ policy on religion, in which the accommodation and support of religion are perceived to be a key concern. While this policy has a long pedigree in Norway, its fullest realisation has been developed in the two first decades of the 21st century. In a government white paper in 2019, the policy was confirmed and itemised, listing the legal and economic frameworks necessary to accommodate the exercise of religious freedom.

The most prominent form of support, established in the constitution since 2012, is the economic funds offered to all registered religious communities in Norway,<sup>7</sup> a support mechanism that has become subject to legal regulation in the 2021 Religious Communities Act, which lays down a list of criteria for state approval and support (for an overview of the prehistory and development of these criteria, see Årsheim 2021). Additionally, the ‘active support’ entails the wide-reaching accommodation of religion in state-driven institutions, from the armed forces and hospitals to prisons and in the educational system, and the continued status of the Church of Norway as an ‘established’ church that is legally required to be present in all Norwegian municipalities.

Crucially, the policy of accommodation is not based on the inherent value of religious belief, membership, or practice as such but rather on the perceived external effects of religion to social cohesion and togetherness. This ambition resembles the very differently argued French notion of *vive l'ensemble*, or ‘living together’, in its stress on the basic elements required for some kind of social amicability across religious boundaries. Whereas the French concept is derived from a secularist view of religion, the Norwegian approach has been developed from within a strong tradition of official religious establishment, resulting in very different policies on religion, despite a shared ambition to create well-functioning societies.

More specifically, the Norwegian policy on religion as a means for which to create ‘togetherness’ is based on the presupposition that an accommodating posture serves four purposes: (a) it ensures societal development and provides cultural infrastructure because of the many social services provided by religious communities; (b) it engenders mutual trust between state officials and religious communities by offering a platform for dialogue and engagement; (c) it offers vital input to public debate by stimulating religious communities to partake in discussions that concern them; and (d) it secures transparency through the continuous contact established between religious communities and state officials.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, all of these purposes are limited to religious communities that succeed in gaining official approval, and the number of such communities has shrunk considerably as a cause of stricter rules for approval.<sup>9</sup> This list strongly correlates with Propositions 1 and 2 in the introduction to this volume, regarding the

influence of a history of majority religion with a cordial relationship with the state as a predictor of successful pandemic management.

By the time COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization in February 2020, the Ministry of Health had determined that the spread of the virus made it ‘universally harmful’ under the 1994 Act on Contagious Diseases, section 1-3. This determination made it possible for the government to trigger a broad number of highly invasive restrictions that would otherwise have been unlawful without a broader discussion beforehand: Under section 7-12 of the Act, the government was empowered to ‘set aside other legislation’ to enforce necessary restrictions, in ways similar to those made available during war, war-like conditions, and similar events. Hence, the legal framework was well-prepared for an event such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The institutions empowered to implement the restrictions, on the other hand, were far less prepared for the situation, and the early weeks of the pandemic were marked by significant degrees of uncertainty concerning the ways in which to deal with the pandemic in terms of necessary equipment, decision-making, and communication.

While the Act on Contagious Diseases empowered the government to implement wide-reaching restrictions akin to those made during times of war, all major human rights guarantees remained in place, including the freedom of religion or belief, which is included in the list of rights that cannot be derogated from in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 4(2). According to legal analysis commissioned by STL, an umbrella organisation for religious communities, the limitation of the freedom of religion or belief put in place satisfied the basic requirements set out in international human rights law: that the limitations were prescribed by law, that they were required in order to protect the health, freedom, and rights of others, and that they were necessary in a democratic society and proportionate to their objectives. Despite expressing some misgivings with the quality and transparency of the decision-making distinguishing between ‘mounted’ and ‘non-mounted’ seating arrangements issue, the analysis largely condones the ways in which Norwegian authorities limited the freedom of religion or belief during the pandemic (see more on the STL assessment below).

Taken together, the Norwegian legal response to the pandemic was framed firmly within the boundaries of the right to freedom of

religion or belief in international human rights law. Arguably, the entrenched nature of this right in the Norwegian political culture and legal arrangements made it an efficient and useful tool with which to negotiate the boundaries between state power and the freedom of individuals and communities to maintain and exercise their religious freedom. Crucially, neither state authorities nor religious communities sought to weaponise or antagonise the boundaries of the right – rather, the right became a platform for negotiation between the communities concerned. In this way, the Norwegian legal response to the pandemic found a pragmatic middle way between the often antagonistic and polarly opposed views of this right in contemporary human rights scholarship, which has tended to frame religious freedom as an either/or (see the introduction to this chapter).

### Sociological Aspects

The social role of religion in Norway is marked by what sociologist of religion Inger Furseth has diagnosed as a condition of ‘complexity’, in which religious decline in terms of membership, practice, and belief is accompanied by its continued vitality as a marker of identity and as a topic of continuous public debate and media coverage, particularly concerning the social and public role of Islam (Furseth et al. 2019). The observation that religion remains publicly contentious is backed up by survey data that regularly documents substantial suspicion and hostility towards religious minorities (Hellevik 2020). Against this backdrop of religious complexity, the developmental trajectory of the COVID-19 pandemic offers an interesting case study of the boundaries between law, religion, and society.

The interrelationship between law and religion during the COVID-19 pandemic may usefully be divided into three separate, yet strongly interrelated phases, ranging from (a) the initial phase, during which virtually every sector of society was closed down, including religious gatherings of all sorts; to (b) the intermediate phase, during which restrictions were adjusted, removed, and reintroduced over the course of the months following the original outbreak; and to (c) the aftermath, during which the prior phases were subjected to analysis and commentary, while vaccinations became a major topic of contention.

### *Initial Phase*

The first case of COVID-19 was identified in Norway on 26 February 2020. On 12 March, the day after the World Health Organization declared the spread of the virus a pandemic,<sup>10</sup> the first death caused by the virus occurred, and the government introduced an array of measures to contain the virus, including the closure of schools and kindergartens, and the prohibition of all sports, cultural, political, and religious events.<sup>11</sup> Over the course of the next couple of weeks, numerous additional measures to reduce social contact were introduced, including forced quarantine for people arriving from abroad, and the closure of all ports of entry by land, air, and sea.<sup>12</sup>

Prior to these restrictions, a foretaste of the complex interaction between religious communities, beliefs, and behaviours and the pandemic had already become evident when the evangelical TV channel TV Visjon Norge aired a show on 27 February during which preacher Dionny Baez proclaimed that donations to the channel would secure God's protection against the virus. The claim was met with widespread condemnation from health service personnel, politicians, and co-religionists, some of whom branded the show 'anti-Christian.'<sup>13</sup> This backlash did not stop the channel from engaging in further controversies related to COVID-19: the head pastor of the network, Jan Hanvold, announced in a broadcast on 22 March that the virus was 'built upon lies and seductions, planted by the government.'<sup>14</sup> The network would go on to become one of the hotbeds of resistance towards restrictions imposed to contain the virus, and in August 2021 became the centre of a small outbreak, as 24 people from six different municipalities came down with the virus after attending a Visjon Norge event.<sup>15</sup>

These incidents notwithstanding, during the early stage of the pandemic, political, legal, and social attention was mainly directed at the establishment of procedures and mechanisms that could limit the spread and impact of the virus, with the health services in the spotlight. With the adoption of the COVID-19 Regulation<sup>16</sup> on 27 March 2020, more specific ramifications for different parts of society were introduced, as the regulation spelled out different rules for a range of specific settings. Over the course of the next two years, these rules would be adjusted and altered more than 30 times to keep abreast with the evolving trajectory of the pandemic. While the first iteration of the regulation prohibited any kind of sporting or cultural event, religious

gatherings were first mentioned explicitly on 7 May, when an adjustment of the rules opened up the opportunity for sporting, cultural, and religious events with 50 participants, provided that they could maintain a distance of one metre. The continued adjustments to the regulation would go on to become one of the battleground areas in the later stages of the pandemic.

A key concern in the early stages of the pandemic was the distinction between functions that were ‘vital’ for society and functions that were not, the latter being eligible for limitations and restrictions.<sup>17</sup> In 2017, the Norwegian Directorate for Civil Protection (DSB) created a generic inventory of such functions that would inspire the list of functions that were sheltered from restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>18</sup> While the generic list does not feature religion in any way or form, the COVID-19 list created by the government in 2021 listed ‘burials’ as a vital function that could not be unduly restricted by pandemic measures.<sup>19</sup> Although the inclusion of burials in this list sheltered the work of crematorium and graveyard workers from some of the restrictions imposed on other sectors, it did not prevent strict limits on the number of attendees at burial ceremonies. As such, while burials were considered ‘vital’, the rituals and gatherings associated with mourning were not.

In the early stage of the pandemic, the emphasis in social and print media concerning religion was mostly directed towards coping mechanisms – how religious communities were adapting their services to become available digitally as a replacement for physical gatherings. The restrictions were imposed only a few weeks before Easter and Ramadan, both of which became subject to media coverage. The emphasis on Easter services was largely sympathetic, focusing on alternative forms of commemoration, such as drive-in and online services, and reporting record turnouts and widespread sympathy for those who were prevented from their usual Easter observance.

Upon the beginning of Ramadan, a small number of similarly phrased media cases about coping and managing digital services were reported. Simultaneously, however, additional messages appeared: on 20 April, the minister for education, while congratulating Norwegian Muslims on the month ahead, issued a plea for religious leaders to ‘remind’ their congregations on the need to maintain official restrictions.<sup>20</sup> Shortly after, a professor of immunology at the University of Oslo recommended that Muslims should be drinking water despite

fasting, to keep hydrated as a preventive measure against contagion.<sup>21</sup> Responding to these calls, the two major umbrella organisations for Muslims in Norway, the Islamic Council of Norway (IRN) and Muslimsk Dialognettverk (MDN), issued their own recommendations for how to celebrate Ramadan without violating the restrictions, stressing that people who were frail or ill should not be fasting.<sup>22</sup>

Whereas the MDN recommendation went largely unnoticed, the IRN recommendation, which included an illustration of how prayer could be conducted at home, caused a minor flare-up across social media. In the recommendation, a variety of family constellations are depicted, but consistently with the father – or the son, if he has a better command of the Quran – in front of the rest of the family, with women and girls consistently placed at the back.<sup>23</sup> The Facebook post announcing the guidelines drew considerable attention, from both Muslims and non-Muslims, and sparked a debate about gender equality among Norwegian Muslims that was also covered in print media (Bøe 2022). Shortly after the IRN guidelines were published, an alternative set of guidelines placing women in front was published by Hikmah House, a liberal-leaning Muslim NGO founded in 2019.<sup>24</sup>

### *Intermediate Phase*

The intermediate phase of the pandemic – from early summer (May/June) 2020 to December 2020, when the first vaccine was administered in Norway – was marked by the ebb and flow of levels of contagion in the population. Although levels of contagion were significantly reduced during the summer months, fresh mutations and attendant outbreaks emerged throughout the autumn, leading to continuous adjustments of the COVID-19 Regulation, particularly section 13, which outlined which kinds of events and gatherings could be held, and under what conditions – starting from a maximum of 50 participants at least one metre apart. From 7 May, religious gatherings were mentioned explicitly in section 13, being subjected to the same kinds of restrictions as sports and cultural events. Starting on 15 June, however, as levels of contagion were easing up, a list of events exempted from restrictions were added to the paragraph, concerning professional athletes, youths attending summer schools and summer camps, and artists performing professionally. Notably, no similar easing was admitted to religious congregants. The number of exemptions grew steadily throughout the

summer months, and on 12 August ‘persons attending religious ceremonies that require brief, close encounters’ were added to the list.

As outbreaks erupted in a variety of different settings throughout the summer months, debates about whether immigrants in general and Muslims in particular were to blame emerged across social and print media. An Ashura celebration in August led to a major outbreak in cities in Viken county, inspiring scattered criticism about immigrants who refuse to integrate and about whether Muslims were eligible for ‘special treatment’. However, the number of comparable events from different types of gatherings caused the debate to dissipate quickly.<sup>25</sup>

In October 2020, the COVID-19 Regulation went through a major overhaul. While restrictions for gatherings of up to 50 people were kept, an exemption for events made it possible to gather up to 200 people – but only if the seats in question were ‘mounted’, i.e. fastened to the floor or wall. Following some confusion over whether church benches were sufficiently mounted or not, the ministry of health concluded that they were not, limiting religious services to 50 attendees, unlike cultural or sporting events.<sup>26</sup> This requirement went on to become one of the major bones of contention in the interaction between religious communities and state authorities throughout the pandemic. It also turned out to be a political headache for the Christian Democratic Party, a minor partner in the ruling coalition government, whose leadership was strongly opposed to the requirement. In February 2021, the requirement for ‘mounted’ seats was scrapped, and replaced by ‘assigned’ seats, removing what appeared to be an arbitrary and potentially illegal requirement (see below).

### *The Aftermath*

As the first dose of the recently developed COVID-19 vaccine was administered on 27 December 2020, Norwegian society gradually started entering the aftermath of the pandemic. Although numerous lockdowns and outbreaks erupted throughout 2021, the mood and mode of the restrictions and the public debate about the proper level of restrictions changed gradually. As in many other countries, concerns about lockdown and quarantine were slowly shifted towards vaccines – their efficiency and safety, and the extent to which they were distributed fast and equitably enough.

Although concerns about how an eventual vaccine would be received in some insular and conspiratorially leaning religious communities had been expressed as early as March 2020,<sup>27</sup> vaccination rates in Norway were generally high. In a survey conducted in June 2020 from a sample of 1,225 respondents, Dyrendal and Hestad found self-reported religiosity to be a weak predictor of conspiracy beliefs but a strong predictor of reported meaningfulness (Dyrendal and Hestad 2021, 109). Hence, while religionists may more easily believe in conspiracies about the virus and the vaccine, holding religious beliefs may also offer consolation and a sense of meaning in an otherwise dire situation.

Despite high levels of vaccination, concerns were quickly raised about the extent to which some immigrant communities would opt out of vaccination, prompting meetings between religious leaders and government representatives, and a social media campaign to convince religious communities about the need to get vaccinated, spearheaded by the Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities in Norway (STL), an umbrella organisation for religious communities. The campaign featured videos of religious leaders recommending vaccination in numerous of the most widely used minority languages.<sup>28</sup> The IRN followed suit with a recommendation to take the vaccine, based on an assessment by Islamic legal scholars finding that no prohibited ingredients were included in the vaccine, and that taking the vaccine would not amount to breaking the Ramadan fast because it was injected intramuscularly, and hence did not constitute food or drink.<sup>29</sup>

Shortly after the pandemic reached Norway, in April 2020, the government appointed an independent commission that would review and assess the ways in which the pandemic was handled. The commission issued two reports – one in April 2021 and a final report in April 2022. Neither of the reports issued by the commission highlighted the impact of the pandemic on religious communities or individuals. In November 2021, however, STL presented an analysis of the limitations of freedom of religion or belief during the pandemic, in which the legal firm Wiersholm found that the justification for the differential treatment of ‘mounted’ seating arrangements could have been more extensive.<sup>30</sup> In June 2023, a second review commission followed suit, finding that the limitations of religion or belief during the intermediate phase of the pandemic may have been too restrictive, and should have been considered more extensively by the government.<sup>31</sup>

The restrictions imposed in March 2020 radically altered the ways in which people in Norway could practise their religiosity, both in the everyday and in relation to major holidays and events. As noted above, the Easter and Ramadan celebrations that year were strongly affected, as were Christmas celebrations, both in 2020 and 2021, with severe restrictions in place in order to contain the virus. Crucially, Norway has developed a sophisticated digital infrastructure, making the switch to digital, and sometimes hybrid, forms of gathering, services, and holiday celebrations relatively uncomplicated for large segments of society.

Numerous studies evaluating the management of the virus in Norway and elsewhere have been published during and in the aftermath of the pandemic. Among the reasons why the Norwegian government turned out to be a ‘high performer’ in crisis management, political scientists Tom Christensen and Per Lægreid cite ‘competent politicians, a high-trust society with a reliable and professional bureaucracy, a strong state, a good economic situation, a big welfare state, and low population density’ (Christensen and Lægreid 2020, 778). Similar reasons have been offered in other studies as well (Ihlen, Johansson, and Blach- Ørsten 2022; Johansson et al. 2023; Ursin, Skjesol, and Tritter 2020). These items add support to the third proposition developed in the introduction to this volume – that societies with high acceptance of scientific authority would be likely to exhibit receptiveness to religious-related restrictions.

While scattered studies have been made of how religionists interpreted and adjusted their practices to the restrictions imposed during the pandemic as it was ongoing (see Eggen 2021; Hodøl, Emanuelsen, and Christian 2022; Holte 2020; Johnsen 2023), little attention has been paid to the longer-term effects of the restrictions, either for the continuation of formats and procedures developed during lockdown or for the longer-term effects upon the worldview and self-understanding within and beyond religious communities. Anecdotal evidence – news reports, websites, social media, and video platforms – suggests that most digital and hybrid formats developed specifically to reach people during the pandemic have been discontinued, but this general impression can so far not be backed up by hard evidence until further research has been conducted. Nevertheless, the experiences gathered during the pandemic are likely to have a lasting impact both on the digital competence of religious communities in general, and on their

likelihood to be able to respond quickly to unforeseen challenges in the future.

## Conclusion

When Norway was locked down in March 2020, virtually every sector of society was significantly limited and restricted. Although restrictions necessarily had different effects upon different people and communities, the scale, scope, and speed of the measures provided a sense of urgency. This sense was quickly framed as a need for solidarity and togetherness and translated into the Norwegian (and Nordic) concept of the *dugnad* – the ‘traditionally unpaid voluntary work where people gather to accomplish a task often involving manual labour that involves many workers’ (Simon and Mobekk 2019, 820). The term was mobilised by Prime Minister Erna Solberg at the very beginning of the lockdown and remained an important talking point for the duration of the pandemic. While the term clearly has positive connotations, its deployment always also indicates a potential boundary maintenance, between those who commit, partake and contribute to the *dugnad* – and those who do not, thereby spoiling the effort for everyone else.

Throughout the pandemic, public discussions about the restrictions, their legitimacy and their effectiveness also included direct and indirect discussions about who contributed to the effort, and who did not, confirming the role of *dugnad* as ‘embedded in a moral repertoire of the *socially responsible citizen* that is indicative of a specific Norwegian welfare mentality’ (Nilsen and Skarpenes 2020, 263, emphasis in the original). Despite the considerable complexity of religion in Norwegian society, however, discussions regarding who contributed, and who did not, only intermittently highlighted religious differences. Rather, the tendency in the public debate about restrictions was dominated by discussions of technical issues like border closures, quarantines, the number of people allowed to gather, and the rate of vaccinations.

Somewhat worryingly, researchers examining media coverage of the pandemic found Norwegian media outlets to exhibit ‘a high degree of consensus and a significant lack of critical journalism’ in a sample of 216 news articles published during two months of the autumn of 2020 (Fonn and Hyde-Clarke 2021). Hence, taking upon themselves the role of conveyors of publicly vital health information during a time

of crisis, the media may have neglected the critical task of examining how the restrictions played out for vulnerable sections of the population, including religious minorities.

Returning to the questions posed in the introduction to this chapter – whether religious communities were repressed during the pandemic and therefore in need of the protections offered by the freedom of religion or belief, or if already-entrenched divisions could become exacerbated through this very right, some tentative conclusions can be offered. As far as the Norwegian case is concerned, religious freedom appears to have been a useful tool for both the government and religious communities to identify and discuss the proper level of restrictions. Arguably, the ways in which public health authorities and religious communities interacted over the course of the pandemic may indicate that at least some of the stated goals of the Norwegian religion policy (see Legal Aspects) are well within reach – particularly concerning the fostering of mutual trust and transparency.

This conclusion comes with a significant asterisk, however – only those religious communities with the requisite resources in terms of manpower, congregants, channels of communication, and finances could partake fully in the *dugnad*. Communities outside this mainstream – without public financial support, official recognition, and a clear organisational structure – may have fared differently. Hence, while religious freedom can be a useful tool for those who are recognisably religious, it can be curiously unhelpful for those outside the mainstream. As research on the multitude of effects the pandemic may have had for different groups and subgroups in society develops further, this is an area that should be further explored.

## Notes

- 1 The establishment of the Church of Norway is relatively recent, and was introduced through wide-reaching constitutional amendments in 2012. Prior to these amendments, the Church of Norway had no separate legal personhood, as a state-run entity devoted to maintaining evangelical Lutheranism, the state religion, as per the former section 2.
- 2 All figures in this section, unless otherwise indicated, are from Statistics Norway, <https://www.ssb.no/en/kultur-og-fritid/religion-og-livssyn> (accessed 11 June 2024). There is no available statistic that breaks down the population in main religions, no religions, or minority religions.

- 3 This number is self-reported by the Humanist Association, at <https://www.human.no/om-oss> (accessed 11 June 2024).
- 4 This figure is approximate, calculated manually on the basis of the membership of the Church of Norway and membership in other religious or worldview communities. There is no official statistic measuring the non-affiliated.
- 5 This figure is from Norwegian Monitor, a biannual social scientific survey conducted since 1985. See <https://www.ipsos.com/nb-no/ukens-tall-26-2-av-3-unge-voksne-tror-ikke-pa-gud> (accessed 11 June 2024).
- 6 The only political party to oppose the policy is the populist, right-wing Progress Party.
- 7 The arrangement has been legally mandated since the first law on religious communities, adopted in 1969. Its elevation to a constitutional principle underscores the cross-political consensus surrounding the active support of religious communities.
- 8 These items were spelled out in the whitepaper establishing the official Norwegian policy on religion: Prop. 130 L (2018–2019) Proposisjon til Stortinget (forslag til lovvedtak) Lov om tros- og livssynssamfunn (trossamfunnsloven), 58–60.
- 9 The new law requires religious communities to have at least 50 members, and to refrain from condoning or performing practices that violate human rights. A proposal to elevate the numerical limit to 100 is currently (2023) pending.
- 10 World Health Organization, ‘Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic’, <https://www.who.int/europe/emergencies/situations/COVID-19> (accessed 9 June 2023).
- 11 Regjeringen, ‘Omfattende tiltak for å bekjempe koronaviruset’, <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumentarkiv/regjeringen-solberg/aktuelt-regjeringen-solberg/smk/pressemeldinger/2020/nye-tiltak/id2693327/> (accessed 9 June 2023).
- 12 A timeline of restrictions is available at the official website of the government. Regjeringen, ‘Tidslinje: myndighetenes håndtering av koronasituasjonen’, <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/Koronasituasjonen/tidslinje-koronaviruset/id2692402/> (accessed 9 June 2023).
- 13 NRK Nyheter, ‘Ba om penger til Visjon Norge for å bli beskyttet mot koronaviruset’, <https://www.nrk.no/osloogviken/ba-om-penger-til-visjon-norge-for-a-bli-beskyttet-mot-koronaviruset-1.14922251> (accessed 16 June 2023).
- 14 NRK Nyheter, ‘Kontroversiell TV-pastor sa at koronaviruset bygget på en løgn’, <https://www.nrk.no/norge/kontroversiell-tv-pastor-sa-at-koronaviruset-bygget-pa-en-logn-1.14956164> (accessed 16 June 2023).
- 15 Norge iDAG, ‘Korona-smitteutbrudd hos Visjon Norge’, <https://idag.no/smitteutbrudd-hos-visjon-norge/19.36908>. (accessed 16 June 2023).
- 16 This regulation was adopted under the 1994 Act Relating to Control of Communicable Diseases. For more on the Act, see section 4.
- 17 The directly translated term, which also has some uptake internationally, is ‘critical infrastructure’. However, the Norwegian directorate in charge of this question has published a report using the term ‘vital functions’, and therefore this translation will also be used here to avoid terminological confusion.

- 18 DSB, 'Vital functions in society. What functional capabilities must society maintain at all times?' [https://www.dsb.no/globalassets/dokumenter/rapporter/kiks-ii\\_english\\_version.pdf](https://www.dsb.no/globalassets/dokumenter/rapporter/kiks-ii_english_version.pdf) (accessed 19 June 2023).
- 19 Regjeringen, 'Liste over kritiske samfunnsfunksjoner', <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/samfunnsikkerhet-og-beredskap/innsikt/liste-over-kritiske-samfunnsfunksjoner/id2695609/>. (accessed 19 June 2023).
- 20 Nettavisen, 'Kunnskapsminister Guri Melby (V) ber religiøse ledere om å minne om myndighetenes smitteverntiltak i anledning av ramadan', <https://www.nettavisen.no/nyheter/innenriks/kunnskapsministeren-ber-religiose-ledere-minne-om-smittevern/s/12-95-3423956167> (accessed 19 June 2023).
- 21 NRK, 'Ber muslimer drikke vann under ramadan', [https://www.nrk.no/osloog-viken/professor\\_-muslimer-bor-drikke-vann-under-ramadan-1.14988045](https://www.nrk.no/osloog-viken/professor_-muslimer-bor-drikke-vann-under-ramadan-1.14988045) (accessed 19 June 2023).
- 22 Until 2017, the IRN was the main organisation representing Muslims in Norway. After a string of controversial cases concerning the ideological drift of the organisation, however, a selection of the largest and most liberal-leaning mosques in Norway left and founded the MDN. For an account of the role of IRN, including the run-up to the breakout of MDN, see Elgvin (2021).
- 23 The illustration is available at <https://www.utrop.no/nyheter/kultur/215003/> (accessed 19 June 2023).
- 24 Hikmah-huset, <https://www.facebook.com/Hikmahhuset/>.
- 25 Utrop, 'Enkeltgrupper kan ikke gis skylden for korona', <https://www.utrop.no/nyheter/nytt/228989/> (accessed 22 June 2023).
- 26 Nettavisen, 'Maks 50 personer på gudstjenester i kirker med benker', <https://www.nettavisen.no/nyheter/innenriks/maks-50-personer-pa-gudstjenester-i-kirker-med-benker/s/12-95-3424042566> (accessed 22 June 2023).
- 27 Dagen, 'Konspirasjonsteorier dreper', <https://www.dagen.no/meninger/konspirasjonsteorier-dreper/> (accessed 22 June 2023).
- 28 STL. #tadetsistestikk – med tro på vaksine <https://stl.no/nyheter/tadetsistestikk-med-tro-pa-vaksine/>
- 29 IRN. Vaksinasjon mot COVID-19. <https://irn.no/vaksinering-mot-COVID-19/> (accessed 22.06.2023)
- 30 STL. Glemte myndighetene religions- og livssynsfriheten under pandemien? <https://stl.no/nyheter/glemte-myndighetene-religions-og-livssynsfriheten-under-pandemien/>. (accessed 26.06.2023).
- 31 NOU 2023: 16 *Evalueringsrapport om pandemihåndteringen*, p. 88-89. <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/b1dace9390054c85a5a87c7bbf1bc384/no/pdfs/nou202320230016000dddpdfs.pdf> (accessed 26.06.2023).

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