

Norway

Norway is a constitutional parliamentary monarchy of about five million inhabitants, bordering its Nordic neighbours Sweden and Finland, as well as Russia. Norway is rated as having the highest Human Development Index (HDI) in the world, according to the most recent data published in 2018. Recent reforms which extend and exaggerate privileges to Christianity in public education, to the point that the religious education curriculum can likely no longer be considered “non-confessional”, give cause for concern.

Constitution and government	Education and children’s rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
<u>There is a nominal state church with few privileges or progress is being made toward disestablishment</u> <u>Official symbolic deference to religion</u>	<u>State-funded schools provide religious education which may be nominally comprehensive but is substantively biased or borderline confessional</u>		
		<u>No religious tribunals of concern, secular groups operate freely, individuals are not persecuted by the state</u>	<u>No fundamental restrictions on freedom of expression or advocacy of humanist values</u>

Legend

Constitution and government

Freedom of religion and freedom of expression are protected by the Norwegian Constitution (Articles 16 and 100, respectively). Article 16 of the Constitution prominently refers to Christianity, but affirms freedom of religion for all:

“All inhabitants of the realm shall have the right to free exercise of their religion. The Church of Norway, an Evangelical-Lutheran church, will remain the Established Church of Norway and will as such be supported by the State. Detailed provisions as to its system will be laid down by law. All religious and belief communities should be supported on equal terms.”

<stortinget.no/globalassets/pdf/english/constitutionenglish.pdf>

While the Norwegian state supports the Evangelical-Lutheran Church financially, other groups (religious or secular) may also register with the government to receive financial support from the state. The degree of financial support is provided to all groups in proportion to their formally registered membership. In practice, however, some of the government financial support is exclusive for the Church of Norway, as the Norwegian state continues to finance tasks that the state used to fund when the Church of Norway was an official entity.

Church of Norway

In 2012, the ties between the Church of Norway and the state were partly dissolved. However, the

Evangelical-Lutheran Church (Den norske kirke) is still described as “the Established Church of Norway” (Norges Folkekirke) in the Norwegian constitution, although it is the Parliament that decides the church law that regulates even internal matters of the Church of Norway.

Article 2 of the Constitution had previously stated that “The Evangelical-Lutheran religion shall remain the official religion of the State. The inhabitants professing it are bound to bring up their children in the same.” The article was changed in 2012 to a somewhat more inclusive wording: “Our values will remain our Christian and humanist heritage.” A requirement that at least half of the government had to be church members was also removed in 2012.

From January 2017, the Church of Norway was given status as a legal entity and the clergy are from the same date no longer “state officials” but employed by the church itself. However, funding for their salaries are still provided by the state.

Even though there is an ongoing process to separate state and church on the national level, at the local level the situation remains partially unchanged. By law local municipalities are required to build and take care of church buildings, while there is no such obligation to provide other belief communities with facilities like assembly halls or venues for ceremonial activities.

Since 2012, the monarch is no longer the head of the Church of Norway. The monarch is however still required to profess the Evangelical-Lutheran religion (hence the monarch’s own ‘religious freedom’ is compromised) and the monarch must invoke “God, the Almighty and Omniscient” in the oath of accession (Art. 4 and Art. 9, Constitution).

<[human.no/politikk-og-debatt/stat-og-kirke/mer-om-statskirkeordningen/](https://www.human.no/politikk-og-debatt/stat-og-kirke/mer-om-statskirkeordningen/)>

During the 42nd Session of the UN Human Rights Council in 2019, the Norwegian Humanist Association’s Senior International Adviser pointed out that while progress has been made in the past few years, Norway still faces problems “pertaining to the constitutional protection of freedom of religion or belief in Norway. Articles 2, 4 and 16 of the Constitution emphasise the state’s Christian values, demand that the king shall adhere to the Lutheran faith and places the Church of Norway in a privileged position.” She further commented that the Norwegian Humanist Association was worried that “these provisions send a signal of exclusion, and may lead to discrimination, or undermine the long-standing tradition of equal treatment”, and thus called for “the government of Norway to amend these articles and to include the right to freedom of religion or belief into the human rights chapter of the Constitution, to bring it in line with international and European human rights law.”

<[humanists.international/2019/10/humanists-call-on-norway-to-make-constitution-more-inclusive/](https://www.humanists.international/2019/10/humanists-call-on-norway-to-make-constitution-more-inclusive/)>

Education and children’s rights

Many state schools take the students to church services before Easter or Christmas. Even though students are not formally required to take part, peer pressure and inadequate information on exemption rules results in some students participating in the school church services against their will.

Changes to religious education in 2015 have raised serious concerns of undue bias toward Christianity in the classroom.

Under the current centre-right coalition government formed in 2013, re-elected in 2017, and expanded to also include the Liberals (2018) and the Christian Democratic Party (2019), there have been more heated debates around various social topics including immigration, reproductive rights, as well as education and religion.

The Christian Democrats are widely regarded to have based their support for the coalition on an education reform, which as of the 2015 school year, re-emphasises Christianity in religious education. The previous equivalent school subject "Religion, Lifestance and Ethics" (Religion, livssyn og etikk, RLE) was mandatory for Norwegian students, covering world religions on a roughly comparative basis (though there were already some concerns about the prominence or bias toward Christianity under RLE).

However, as of 2015 the subject has been renamed "KRLE", to emphasise "Kristendom" - Christianity - under which teachers are encouraged to make "about half" of the classes cover Christianity exclusively. This is a setback, after many years of political fight over the content of public religious education.

The Norwegian Humanist Association campaigned against the change, arguing that under KRLE, more students were likely to apply for exemption, which might lead to the segregation of students based on religion or belief. The introduction of the symbolic K for Christianity (Kristendom) is not only divisive; the stipulation that about half the classes should cover Christianity represents a distinct bias in the curriculum in the direction of a specific religion and sends a signal that Christianity is more important and more accurate than other religions or beliefs. Further, by dedicating half the classes to Christianity, the teaching of other religions, beliefs, ethics and philosophies would by comparison get less time and so teaching would be of a lower quality. HEF also noted that the change was "not evidence-based, but ideologically and religiously rooted".
<human.no/politikk-og-debatt/religion-og-livssyn-i-skolen/krle/>

As of 2019 there is now an ongoing process of revising the curriculum of KRLE, and there are at least some attempts to change the current situation. It is fair to assume that the Christian and the conservatives will join forces to keep the privileged position of the Church of Norway and Christianity in the school system, but there is also a strong support to make important changes.

Family, community and society

While the majority of the population remain nominally affiliated with the Church of Norway (70% as of December 31st 2018), the most recent figures from Statistics Norway describe a steady decline in number of church baptisms, church confirmations and church membership.
<ssb.no/kultur-og-fritid/artikler-og-publikasjoner/faerre-medlemmer-i-den-norske-kirke-389588>

In reality, polls over recent years have consistently shown Norway to be among the least religious countries in the world, as measured by a relatively small percentage of the population believing in a personal god, a low percentage describing themselves as religious, and very low rates for regular church attendance. For a large percentage of church members, church affiliation is of a nominal ("cultural") rather than of a religious nature.
<fritanke.no/andelen-som-ikke-tror-pa-gud-oker-sterkt-gudstroen-svekkes/19.10773>

The fastest growing group are in fact the "nones", those that don't affiliate with any faith community. According to 2018 statistics, they comprise about 17% of the population, more than the members of all other belief communities outside the Church of Norway.

The Church of Norway is adjusting quite well to this phenomenon, eagerly embracing the very Nordic/Scandinavian concept of the "Peoples 'churches"; not so much belief or god left in that church, but a lot of buildings all over the country where the church provides ceremonies and cultural activities instead of religious activities as their main task. This "cultivation of religion" is strongly supported by many politicians and political parties.

Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values

Freedom of expression is guaranteed in the constitution and generally upheld in practice.

The largest non-religious organization is the Norwegian Humanist Association, *Human-Etisk Forbund* (HEF) with over 93,000 members, as of July 2019. (HEF is a Member of the IHEU.) In principle non-religious groups, including Humanist organizations, are treated on equal footing with religious groups.

“Blasphemy” abolished

In 2015, Norway formally abolished its remaining “blasphemy” law (formerly under section 142 of the Penal Code, banning public expression of “contempt” for religions recognised by the state). There had been no successful prosecutions under the law for some decades, though there had been threats in relation to republication of the Jyllands-Posten cartoons as recently as 2006.

A parliamentary vote had already indicated political consensus to abolish the law, but the decision had not come into effect due to delays in implementing a revised Penal Code. In direct response to the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre in Paris in January 2015, two Norwegian MPs brought a motion in February arguing that the blasphemy prohibition “underpins a perception that religious expressions and symbols are entitled to a special protection... This is very unfortunate signal to send, and it is time that society clearly stands up for freedom of speech.” The motion passed with broad political and public support.

<thelocal.no/20150507/norway-scrap-blasphemy-law-after-hebdo-attacks>

<human.no/politikk-og-debatt/ytringsfrihet-og-blasfemi/>