# The Christian Right in Norway

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Norway is a relatively secular country, which might give relatively limited potential for a strong Christian Right movement, but there is a potential for broad mobilization on particularly family policy.

To understand the Norwegian context, the chapter provides a brief account of Norway's political and religious legacy. Four distinct movements are then identified. In support of these movements one must distinguish between leaders in churches and denominational organization – being cautious, sometimes giving warnings – and their members – many being active supporters. As the main churches, including Pentecostal churches, are relative moderate – only occasionally seeking to influence public policy, primarily family policy – it is more interesting to understand how Christian Right promoters seek to gain influence through four political parties: the Progress Party (Frp), the Christian Peoples' Party (KrF), Conservative (Konservativt, KON, new name from 2022; previously the Christians (PDK)), and the Norwegian Democrats (NDem; new name from 2023, previously the Democrats). Their positions range from relatively liberal Christian values discourse to ultra-conservative Christian nationalism discourse. To understand the potential and the limitations for Christian Right in Norway, I identify four explanations: The outward orientation characterizing the conservative lay movement, the churches' receptiveness of impulses from the global church, a rather limited political polarization, and higher awareness of dangers inherent in certain forms of pro-Christian and anti-Muslim worldviews.

## The legacy

The Lutheran Church of Norway (CoN) formally ceased to be a state church in 2017 and has a (declining) membership of approximately 65 per cent of the Nor-

wegian population. Catholics constitutes approximately 3 per cent – most of which are immigrants, being slightly fewer than Muslims who are members of a congregations – while Pentecostals constitutes less than one per cent of the population, being active on various arenas, as will be shown. The Norwegian system for supporting religious communities is essentially about giving other faith and secular world view communities funding per capita similar to what CoN receives per capita. CoN is described as a folk church in the Norwegian Constitution and is relatively open-minded and liberal, seeking to be inclusive for persons with various backgrounds. The overall religious legacy is far more complex, however.

Norway practiced non-acceptance of religious minorities. Norway's legislation prohibited assemblies not approved by the local priest, of confessions outside of the Lutheran state church, and of Jews, until 1841, 1845 and 1851, respectively. The prohibition against Jews was reinstated in 1942, during the Quisling regime, the fascist collaborator regime during the second world war. The repeal of the prohibition of monastical orders happened in 1897, but from 1857 Catholic sisters established more than 20 hospitals (Hadland 2007). Jesuits were not allowed in Norway until 1956. What does characterize Norway is a relatively strong conservative lay-church movement, which still has a contentious relationship to CoN, due to CoN's rather liberal position on same-sex marriage and abortion. This movement, together with the temperance (teetotaller) movement and Norwegian language movement forms the so-called countercultures. Its potence was evident in both Norwegian EC/EU referendums, in 1972 and 1994, with anti-Catholicism being a potent mobilisation basis in the 1972 campaign against Norwegian membership. Norwegian mission organisations grew strong during the late 19th century and 20th century, and international impulses to Norway came from the mission movement and the many Norwegians who were sailors in foreign seas.

Norway is also characterized by forced assimilation of the Sámi, Finnish-speaking Kven and Romani people – the former being indigenous and the two latter residing in Norway since the 16th century.

Overall, however, there is meager breeding ground for nationalist-conservative religion in Norway. Mudde defines nativism as nationalism with xenophobia (2007, 24). As measured by Pew Research Center (2018, 26), there are 10 West European countries that show higher scores on nativism than Norway.

The same study reveal that Norway stands out from the surveyed population in the other 14 West European states in that church-attending Christians are more open to immigration and less antagonistic against Islam as compared

to the Church members who seldom visit church (Pew Research Center 2018, 21; 23; see also Opinion, 2019, 32). Moreover, church-active are less nativist than passive church members (ibid, 26).

## Four movements

All the movements can be seen as an expression of counterculture, opposing a secularist political elite. The four movements that are considered important are Visjon Norge, the Christian zionism movement, the protagonists of Norwegian legislation being "Christian" and the protagonists of a more visible Christianity in public space.

A person who earlier was rather visible in Norway, Jan-Aage Torp, who is one of many pastors promoted by Visjon Norge (2022), has recently built alliances with Christian conservative organisations in Central Europe, most notably Ordo Iuris, and a couple of ambassadors to Norway (Larsen and Gilje 2021a; 2021b). Torp's main platform is Kristen Koalisjon Norge (KKN) (2021), which has no other public persons connected (Gjøsund 2021), and he is currently irrelevant in Norway.

Visjon Norge (VN) is primarily a television channel broadcasting 24/7, and its founder has in several ways supported Donald Trump, in 2016 and in 2020, claiming before the election that Trump had won (Hanvold 2020). VN is staunchly pro-Israel, pro-right wing, and owns a Bible school. In February 2020, VN called for a donation of NOK 2020 to "shield your children" from Covid-19 (Larsen 2020). Its formidable growth in in the 2000s and absence of the principle of arms-length distance in property transactions within the wider VN conglomerate has been revealed in a 2016 documentary with the title The Money Preacher (NRK 2016). The annual turnover has seen a decline in most of the 2010s (Nordahl 2019), but its influence has not been reduced. Its Christian conservative profile and general outreach justifies why VN, whose founder and owner is a Pentecostal, can be viewed as an important actor. VN is included in all larger channel subscriptions in Norway and is available also Denmark and Sweden. The leaders of the low-church conservative organisations seek to distance themselves from VN (Ottosen 2020), but many of their members are financial contributors to VN.

Norway stands out by its vibrant Christian zionism movement, most notably the Norwegian branch of the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem (ICEJ). ICEJ has links primarily to KON, whose current chair used to work for

ICEJ Norway. While there are several pro-Israel protagonists within Frp, there are currently no Frp politicians serving as bridges between the Christian Zionism movement and the Norwegian Parliament. Until 2023 ICEJ Norway convened the annual Oslo Symposium, together with the organisation Kristenfolket and the weekly newspaper Norge IDAG, but in 2023 there are *two* Oslo Symposiums, one by Kristen Mediaallianse, Kristenfolket and De Frie Evangeliske Forsamlinger Oslo (IDAG 2023) and one by Kristen Media Norge and ICEJ Norway (2023). IDAG was founded by a *previous* editor of the Christian conservative and explicitly anti-Trump daily newspaper Dagen, whose *current* editor challenges KON, IDAG and VN leaders (Selbekk 2021). While its number of attendees is relatively small, Oslo Symposium, which is transmitted via VN, seeks to mobilize conservative Christians to engage politically.

The third movement consists of various ad hoc initiatives to keep Norwegian legislation in line with what is held as Biblical teaching. The petitions to keep a privileged role for Christianity in Norwegian schools in the 1960s and keep the prohibition against abortion in the 1970s are the two largest in Norway's history, collecting 756,000 and 610,000 signatures, respectively (Berg 2013). Both these and the efforts in the 2000s to keep the marriage act were lost battles (Monsen 2009). Nevertheless, the potency of these movements cannot be denied, and 53 per cent of Norwegians acknowledge that the Church does protect and strengthen morality (Pew Research Center 2018, 145). These campaigns and the underlying tensions very well illustrate religious polarization as identified by Ribberink, Achterberg and Houtman (2018) in secular Protestant countries in Europe.

Finally, various campaigns have emerged to foster a more visible Christianity in public space, often linked to anti-Islam manifestations. These tend to be spontaneous and *ad hoc*, one example being the campaign Yes to carry the cross whenever and wherever I want, with more than 107.000 FB-likes, representing highly diverse attitudes (Abdel-Fadil 2017).

This review shows that the Christian conservative movement in Norway has a certain ability to collect money and mobilize persons for the purpose of stemming the perceived threat of secularization – seeing legislation as the crucial tool. One example is the seminar with seven Lutheran organisations as convenors: Christian faith in a squeeze – Christian in a secularized society (KPK 2009). The main message was that Christian faith and committed action is somehow restricted by having legislation with a weaker Christian embedding.

## Four political parties

There are complex dynamics between the movements and the parties. By counting what has been won during the last 50 years in the realm of defending "Christian values" the restrictions on twin abortion from 2019 is one of the few victories. This came as a result of the political bargain to make KrF join the center-right government, and a ban of so-colled foetus reduction was included in the common platform of the then majority government (Four parties, 2019, 55), later approved by the Norwegian Parliament (2019).

The four relevant parties – characterized by emphasizing Christianity in highly diverse ways, ranging from faith-focused to nativist-focused – are presented according to their size. The support for the two smaller parties – receiving a total of 1.5 per cent of the votes in 2021 – indicates the relatively limited potential of the Christian Right in Norway.

*The Progress Party (Frp)* was originally an anti-taxation party that turned into a right-wing populist anti-immigration party. After a schism in 1994, when many liberalists left the party, the party radicalised during the late 1990s, becoming more anti-immigration and anti-Islam (Jupskås 2016). CoN leaders called upon people *not* to vote for this party at the parliamentary election in 1997, and Frp's rhetoric was claimed to contrast with Western civilisation values (Haugen 2014). Its best election result came in 2009, with 22.9 per cent, but the support is currently almost halved, getting 11.6 per cent in the 2021 parliamentary elections, after being in government from 2013 to 2020.

The party leader from 2021, Sylvi Listhaug, oftentimes wearing a visible cross in her necklace, held five ministerial positions from 2013 to 2020. Listhaug has also been an ardent critic of CoN and of what she considers as "soft attitudes" by especially KrF, with the mean accusation that the former chair (2011–2018) sought to please imams as the low point (Furuly and Randen 2017; the phrase used was "Hareide licks imams up the back").

According to her previous advisor (and spin-doctor), especially "in the large Pentecostal movement" there are Christians who felt "rejected" by politicians other than Listhaug, and an active approach to these was therefore prioritized (Hoel 2019), but the last period of some movement of voters from KrF to Frp was in 2013–2017 (Bergh and Aardal 2019, 17).

The party programme specifies that it is based on the Christian worldview (Frp 2021, 4) and calls for mandatory school worship – with exemption possibilities (ibid, 84). Its liberalist and majority culture position is evidenced in its long-standing rejection of the (generous) public support scheme for religious

communities (ibid, 91). While implementing this policy will negatively affect Pentecostal and other smaller churches, these concerns are subordinate to the concerns relating to the continued support to for instance Muslim congregations.

Specifically on immigration, Frp's party programme says that Norway shall receive only Christian refugees (Frp, 2021, 18). In the national budget agreement for 2021, Frp and the Government agreed that Christian, Ahmadiyya and Yezidi refugees are to be prioritized in the resettlement of refugees in Norway (Norwegian Parliament 2020, 1398–1399).

*Christian Peoples' Party (KrF)* – being a member of the International Democrat Union (IDU) – deviates from its sister parties in Europe by using Christian *People*, and not Christian *Democratic*, in its name. The party was established in 1933, and had its best election in 1997, with 13.7 per cent. Until 2013 KrF had a requirement of Christian confessional belonging for those representing the party, but now it seeks to appeal more broadly. The election result in 2021 was merely 3.8 per cent. It has lost voters to almost all parties.

KrF is not a Christian Right party but has appeal within Christian Right circles. 2021 saw a campaign among the two newspapers Dagen (daily, conservative) and Norge IDAG (weekly, right-wing) to urge their readers to vote for KrF (Søkelys 2021); as KrF is seen as a guarantor of certain traditional moral positions, notably opposing same-sex marriage and abortion (KrF, 2021, 33), and promoting Christianity in school and media.

The party had a split in late 2018, when the (then) party leader wanted to form a government with the center-left. A promise by the (Conservative) Prime Minister to be positive to modifying the Abortion act on twin abortion was important in shifting at least some of those who join a narrow majority (98–90) in voting for joining the center-right government. Several who wanted to form a center-left government subsequently left KrF.

The party leader 2018–2021 was replaced by another supporter of the 2018 majority. Despite the shift to the right, the current KrF party programme omits the earlier call for moving the Norwegian embassy to Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

*The Norwegian Democrats (NDem)* a national-conservative party with nativist convictions, gained 1.1 per cent in the 2021 elections. It was established in 2002, a large share of its leading persons have a past in Frp, including its present leader. Its first party programme adopted in 2005 emphasized in the first paragraph that its principles build on Christian values ("livsverdier"). There is a shift from this explicit embedding and being supportive of "the church" (Dem [now

NDem] 2005) – presumably CoN – to the 2021 programme's emphasis on combatting Islam, including prohibiting the hijab and halal food (NDem 2021, 20) and merely referring to a Christian value basis for Norway, as "Christianity is a bulwark…" (ibid, 49).

Moreover, in the section on culture and media the party announces policies, that will be based on the "Christian and Norse cultural heritage" (ibid, 69), being the first Norwegian party that is explicitly anchoring its policies in a Norse cultural heritage.

*Conservativt (KON)*. This party finds that KrF is too soft, on issues like pro-Israel, anti-abortion and immigration control. Nevertheless, Christian conservatism characterizes KON more than nativism. The party gained 0.4 per cent in the 2021 elections (0.6 per cent in the local elections in 2019), was established in 2011 and changed name to Konservativt in 2022.

Its programme specifies that it will counter attempts to make atheism and humanism more influential. Rather, the Norwegian state "in all natural contexts must promote Christian culture and identity, and thus form a bulwark against attitudes and views of the human being that contradict this heritage" (KON 2021, 12). How exactly the state's promotion of Christianity is to serve this function of "bulwark" is not clear, however.

Three specific policy priorities do provide some answers, however. The party wants to prohibit abortion (ibid, 10), same-sex marriage (ibid, 6) and introduce a compulsory subject on Christianity – with no exemptions (ibid, 19). All other religions are to be taught in social sciences. Finally, Christian asylum seekers are to be prioritized (ibid, 60).

In summary, while the programmes of the four parties differ substantively, they share one perception, namely that there are mutual relationships between positive, liberal values, including respect for human rights and "Christian values". Hence, the Norwegian Christian heritage is understood by these four parties as encompassing liberal values. "Christian values", however, has different meaning for different persons, ranging from a "humanist" protection discourse in KrF to a "nationalist" protection discourse in Frp, NDem and KON.

Moreover, Brekke, after interviewing central persons in PDK [now KON], finds that they generally perceive that there is a "leftist-Muslim Plot against Christianity" (Brekke 2019), a thinking that also characterizes NDem. These two parties, however, remain marginal, and there is disagreement between the party leaders whether a joint position on 25 issues launched in December 2021 might be a first step towards merging the two parties (Dem [now NDem] and

PDK [now KON] 2021). KrF's decline shows that mobilising by calling for traditional values, supportive policies for families and global justice is a too narrow basis to gain broad electoral support in Norway. Particularly Frp has a broader notion of what "Christian" entails, namely a belonging relationship and appreciation for Christianity as part of Norwegian tradition.

## Reminding of the context and identifying four additional explanations

The introduction highlighted that Norway is characterized by various forms of countercultures, previous forced assimilation – being apologized by both church and state – and church-attending Christian being less anti-immigration, anti-Muslim and nativist than those who report to be merely church members (Pew Research Center 2018, 21; 23; 26). Similar attitudes are expressed by the CoN elite (bishops, deans and members of the National Church Council) (Gulbrandsen 2019, 128; Gulbrandsen et al. 2002, 182). Counterculture expressed as pro-districts attitudes among the CoN elite correlates with being pro-immigration (Gulbrandsen 2020).

This context is in itself important in explaining the relatively weak potential of the Christian Right in Norway. Those who oppose what they see as a leftist-leaning CoN – the previously mentioned leader of Frp, Sylvi Listhaug, being one – do, however, constitute a certain percentage of the population.

I identify four additional explanations for the limited breeding ground of a strong Christian Right movement in Norway: two focusing on the churches themselves – outward orientation and receptivity – and two focusing on the broader Norwegian political discourse: limited polarization and the post-22 July 2011 debate.

While there are exceptions, the outward orientation promoted by the mission movement has made Norwegian conservative Christians become internationalists. While the first missionaries, notably to Greenland, were "state missionaries" Norwegian missionaries from the organisations were never a tool for colonial expansion and control. In brief, prejudices were replaced by partnerships.

CoN has always been a protagonist for the global ecumenical movement and has also fostered stronger church cooperation – and inter-faith cooperation – in Norway, primarily from the end of the 20$^{th}$ century. Through the impulses from the global ecumenical movement, justice and dignity for those

fleeing persecution is affirmed by welcoming them, and Biblical commandments of hospitality are frequently referred to.

As mentioned above Norway is characterized by polarization regarding the promotion – or not – of religion. Various alternative media have provided space, also for some Christians: resett.no, document.no and Human Rights Service. Norway is not, however, characterized by a deep polarization in the form of what has been termed "culture war", as is present in Denmark (Lövheim et al. 2018, 151).

Finally, post-22 July 2011 early analysis emphasized that while Christianity has for many become a marker for Norwegianness (Døving og Kraft, 2012, 217), there was also a renewed emphasis on religious plurality (Døving og Kraft 2012, 202–203). Later studies are more sceptical about this acknowledgement of plurality (Notaker 2021). The 22 July terrorist had for 10 year a rather active membership (1997–2007) in Frp and its youth movement.

While the terrorist's many Biblical references (Breivik 2011) have been subject to relatively few studies (Strømmen 2017), it is fair to say that he was not a Christian in a traditional sense, but preoccupied with Christian identity (Breivik, 2011, 1363).

This is different from the other Norwegian extreme right terrorist, Philip Manshaus, who killed his sister and was overmanned as he shot himself into a mosque just outside of Oslo 10 August 2019. The preceding year Manshaus was active in two conservative congregations, one in mid-Norway – when attending folk high school – and one in Oslo (NRK 2021, 3:30-5:35 and 10:30-12:10). The 10 August terrorist's longed for traditionalism and moral rigidity, and his Christian revival went in parallel to his hardening into becoming a terrorist.

The presiding bishop of CoN emphasized in his 10 years commemoration speech that the churches need to confront the ideology of the 22 July terrorist. The Christian longing characterizing particularly the 10 August terrorist (NRK 2021, Paulsen 2020, interviewing an ex-member of Manshaus' chosen church) shows that unconditional and essentialist pro-Christian and anti-Muslim worldviews represent one of extremism's breeding ground.

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