

ANGLICAN-LUTHERAN SOCIETY

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SESSION THREE : 'Norway and the Church of Norway Today'

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A Confession

I thought this would be my first attempt to show things on the screen. But I became so interested in what I was reading to prepare for this session, and then writing things down, there was no time left for pictures. So you have just me to listen to as I talk about the Church of Norway.

Introduction

I have been a member of the Church of Norway since 17th March 1946, the date of my Baptism. At that time the population of Norway was 3.1 million whereas today we are 5.4 million, which is quite a big increase. At that time 3 million of us were members of the Church of Norway. There were 12,000 Lutherans in the Lutheran Free Churches, 11,000 Methodists, 4,000 Roman Catholics and 23,000 without any religious affiliation.

At present I find myself trying to understand what is going on in the Church of England while I am a Lutheran Bishop in the United Kingdom. And that is **really** interesting! I have been helped very much by a new book by Jeremy Morris (A People's Church: A History of the Church of England, 2022, Profile Books) which I strongly recommend to anyone who wants to know more about the Church of England. I was in Japan, as I told you yesterday, in a minority Church, and now I am once again in a minority Church in Great Britain. In Japan our membership of Christians was 1% of the population, whereas in the UK our membership of the Lutheran Church in Great Britain is much less than that!



There is an obvious difference between the UK and Norway; we have no Brexit traumas because we did not join the European Union! In the referendum of 1972 I voted against, and in the referendum of 1994 I'm not sure but I think I voted in favour of entry!



Until quite recently we have had a State Church in Norway as you do in England, and we have King Harald V (pictured here) who, like Queen Elizabeth II, has longevity of life. They have the same genes; Harald's grandmother was a daughter of the English King Edward VII, the eldest son of Queen Victoria. Elizabeth was born in 1936 and Harald in 1937. The big difference is that Harald has reigned for 31 years while Elizabeth has celebrated her Platinum Jubilee. By the way, it was a great privilege for me to take part in that Jubilee Service, and the Church of England really knows how to make these celebrations!

Norway



Norway is a bigger country than the United Kingdom being number 62 in the world in terms of area while the UK is number 80. So Norway is the winner there whilst in terms of population the UK is well ahead of Norway with 67.8 million inhabitants whilst, as I have already told you, Norway has just 5.4 million. That is about half of London's population, I think. But according to the United Nations, Norway is the best country to live in.

Why is it so good to live in Norway? Being a small number of people we have plenty of space, and we can be kind to one another and if we don't like someone we can move on to a separate space by ourselves! But it's the fact that we are a homogeneous people that is very

important. Until the last 50 years Norway was not considered an attractive country to move to. There was almost no immigration into Norway until around 1965. However, between 1830 and 1920 800,000 Norwegians left Norway. Perhaps they didn't think there was enough space for them here and they had to find more elsewhere!

The statisticians say that in 2017 17% of the population were immigrants. The right-wing in Norway is protesting that the immigrants are destroying Norway's culture. But just look at the places they come from: they come from Poland, Rumania, Sweden and Germany so our immigrants are mostly Europeans. The numbers from Africa and Asia are tiny in comparison. It is very important to realise that. But we must not forget that we have a small population of indigenous people, the Sami. Pictured here, feeding her reindeer, is Inga Eira, a northern Sami woman living near Tromsø above the Arctic Circle in a photo by Photo by Genevieve Hathaway. In years gone by, the government had a strict programme of 'Norwegianisation' so that the Sami should become 'proper Norwegians'. They were to forget their own language and culture and become 'normal' citizens. That is not a good story, but it is one



that has been replicated the world over. Discussions are going on as to how we can make up for that very bad behaviour.

The arrival of Christianity

Christianity came in the 10th Century. It was not brought by Olav. He was not a very holy man in life and it was only after his death that he became holy, because his bone worked miracles very well! It was King Haakon Haraldsson the Good, the son of Harald Fairhair who was not a Christian but who sent his son to England where he stayed with King Athelstan for ten years, during which time he was baptised. He returned to Norway bringing priests and bishops with him. However, he has a bad reputation because he used force of arms to compel people to become Christians. But there was a period of 20 years of peace in Norway under a Christian king. Those who wrote the sagas prefer writing about fighting rather than peace so there is very little written history of that time. But I think he was a very important person because he created understanding between different religions and different traditions and was able to keep the peace. So I think he should be re-established as our first Christian King.

The Reformation

The next crisis came in 1537. Norway was only a small country and for 200 years had been under either the Swedish or Danish kings. Christian III had been to Worms as a young prince and heard Martin Luther explaining his faith. He was so impressed he went back to Denmark and in 1537 he succeeded in making Denmark a Lutheran country and since Norway was in union with Denmark. However, the Archbishop in Norway at that time was against the Reformation and there was some dissention in the country, but the Archbishop left and Norway became a Lutheran country. The King became the representative of God and he used the priests to serve both his kingdom as well as the Kingdom of God. So for the next 250 years Norway was a peaceful country.

One difficulty, however, was that the five bishops did not function well. Some were elderly while others were taken to Copenhagen for extended periods and the Church of Norway lost the 'Apostolic Succession'. Instead of having bishops they had Superintendents and one of Luther's best friends, Johannes Bugenhagen, pictured here, came and crowned the King, signed the papers and ordained seven new bishops for Norway but he was not ordained as a bishop himself. That's how the succession was lost.



A Norwegian Revolution

We move on another 250 years, and Napoleon started his wars in Europe and England was against him but the Danish King backed him. When Napoleon was defeated the Treaty of Kiel in 1814 between the British and the Swedes Norway was taken from Denmark and given to Sweden. But the Norwegians protested that, at the end of 40 days deliberations, on Ascension Day 1814 delegates from all over Norway had written a constitution of their own. They had wanted an independent Norway and they elected their first King. At first the Kings of Denmark and Sweden accepted this but after a while the Swedes were dissatisfied and started a war which happily did not last too long and in November 1814 the Norwegians accepted the King of Sweden as King of Norway but, they said, 'we must keep our

constitution and our own parliament in Oslo! Under this arrangement Carl XIII, became the King of Sweden and Governor of Norway. Crown Prince Karl Johan (pictured here), the French general Jean Baptiste Bernadotte who had been adopted by the childless Carl XIII in 1810, took a special interest in and responsibility for Norway, and it was he who personally handed golden crosses to the five Norwegian bishops in 1815, and my successor has the one I used to have.



The new constitution was very interesting. It was democratic according to the ideals of that time. Article 2 says 'The Evangelical Lutheran Religion shall remain the official religion of the State. Inhabitants who profess the same shall be required to educate their children therein.' Then Article 4 says 'The King shall at all times profess, maintain and defend the Evangelical Lutheran religion.' So the King was to be a defender of faith and, in practice, the governor of the Church. Article 16 'The King shall establish regulations for all church and religious services of a public nature and for all meetings and gatherings concerning religious affairs and he shall take care that the public structures of religion shall adhere to the prescribed standards.' The constitution is interesting because it says nothing about one of the great ideals of the French Revolution, Freedom of Religion. On the contrary, this is cementing the Lutheran religion as the only accepted religion in Norway. There was a strict article that said Jews were not permitted at all, nor was the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits). Also, there was no freedom of assembly. You could not have a religious meeting if there was no priest present unless he had given permission for the meeting to take place.

It is impossible for you to understand Norwegian History if you do not know the name Hans Nielsen Hauge. He was a farmer in the south-east of Norway and one day, when he was working in the fields, he had an experience which totally changed him. From that moment he could not stop talking to others about the salvation he had experienced. He



started to travel across Norway, either by boat along the coast or on foot, and as he travelled he was always knitting. He was a very spiritual and practical man and he drew people to him and formed small congregations like the one shown here. The priests, especially here in Trondheim, didn't like that at all so he was first arrested in perhaps 1796 here in Trondheim, was released and then



later detained for ten years while a case was being prepared against him. But while in detention Hauge was able to write and to read. It is said that he published 200,000 copies of his books which were very popular, and people were glad to read of his spiritual experiences and also his practical advice. All the lay movements in Norway more or less started with him, and we still see evidence of them today, groups that are opposed to the priesthood and who provoked conflict in the Church of Norway for a very long time. But Hauge said very clearly to his followers, 'Don't leave the Church!' That was his last wish and his legacy lives on within the Church of Norway.

In 1905 there was a coup d'état in the parliament in Oslo. Oscar II, the Swedish king, was rejected. Eventually he accepted this and a referendum was held to decide whether Norway should be a republic or a kingdom, and the kingdom won and they proposed a Danish prince, Carl, and he was elected unanimously and became the first of the new dynasty here taking the name Haakon VII and he ruled until his death in 1957. His wife, Maud, was English, the daughter of Edward VII, and went back to England every winter because it was too cold for her here in Norway!

A difficult period

The worst aspect of the 1930s was the rise of Hitler in Germany and the establishment of the Third Reich. Then came the war. On 9th April 1940 the Germans attacked. King Haakon



eventually escaped to Britain. The Germans appointed the leader of Norway's nationalistic party, Vidkun Quisling (shown here), as Minister-President, and he was inaugurated on 1st February 1942. He was very fond of Trondheim and Stiklestad and if you go to Stiklestad you will be told that it was the place where nationalists used to like to gather. The Minister for Religion declared that a service for the celebration of Quisling's new Norwegian

Government should take place that day in Nidaros Cathedral but the Dean refused. 'I have planned the service,' he said, 'and we shall have our regular morning service there.' The Minister for religion insisted that the service should take place that morning. So somehow the word was sent round that the regular service would take place in the afternoon, and so many people came that afternoon that they had to shut the doors and keep them out! There were thousands gathered outside the west front, and they started singing hymns with a Norwegian flavour. We are told it was a very cold day, and the atmosphere was so powerful that the police had to disperse the people but without using force. That was a very special occasion. Afterwards the Dean was dispossessed by the Nazi regime as a result of which the bishops, meeting in Oslo, said they could no longer continue as bishops in this Church. They therefore sent letters of resignation in which they said they would continue as spiritual leaders but would have nothing to do with the government. Then the priests asked, 'What should we do?'. They prepared a letter that was read on Easter Day. It had been drawn up not only by clergy but also representatives of the lay movements within the Church. Of 858 registered ordained pastors 797 signed up to this document and resigned their positions as government officials. After that only 86 pastors were on the Church's payroll, the Nazi Church. Most priests continued to live in their church houses and to

exercise their pastoral care. So during the war the Church was a symbol of resistance, giving comfort and hope to the population, and creating new structures of cooperation between the priests, the government and the lay movements. People thought this would be a new spring when peace eventually came.

Peace comes – but it brings no spring

The war ended and, unhappily, things got back to normal. The lay movements wanted to keep control over the Church so the old conflicts re-emerged. However, things changed in the 1960s-70s. In 1969 came the 'Petroleum Revolution' when Norway became a rich and



affluent country, and religious education in schools was ended. The local priest would no longer have responsibility for that so they would have to create their own religious education programmes. Then a new influx of immigrants began to arrive and, in common with most western nations, Norway experienced increased secularisation and questions began to be raised about Church-State relationships. Many thought that entering a new millennium would be

the moment for disestablishment of the Church. But how was it to be done? Many people were opposed to change, but representatives of the Church and Parliament were able to create a new Article 2 in the constitution which reads, 'Our values will remain our Christian and Humanist heritage.' And I think the Spirit was with them because they were able to relate back to the Christian tradition as well as the positive Humanist elements in our culture.

The Article 16 was changed to, 'All inhabitants of the realm shall have the right to the free exercise of religion. The Church of Norway, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, will remain the established Church of Norway and will be supported by the State. Detailed provisions will be laid down in the law, and all religions should be supported on equal terms.' When I read this paragraph in English I was astonished because in the Norwegian text, which I think is the one with legal standing, it says, 'The Folkchurch of Norway...' and I think the meaning of Folkchurch is very different from State Church and from Established Church so perhaps the legal authorities here have not consulted theologians at all! You could argue that because they get money from the State they could be called 'Established' but the system here is very different. 'All religions shall be supported on equal terms' so if the Church of Norway is 'established' because it gets money from the State then all the other Churches and religions and accepted humanist organisations are 'established' because they get money from the State too!

The only difficult thing was the King, who did not want to be removed from the constitution so it was his desire that the King should belong to the Lutheran Church. How they will handle that with the coming generations of monarchs we do not know. When a bishop is

ordained the King will always be there, but not officially but as a private person. That is his way of solving the issue.

Difficulties and Challenges in the Church of Norway today

There are many difficulties and challenges of course, but when I look back in my diaries for the 1960s and 70s I was much more pessimistic about the future of the Church than I am today. The voluntary lay organisations are not as strong as they were, we have difficulty



recruiting enough priests. However, confirmation classes are still strong, and we see here a group of confirmands in Rindal in the south of Norway. However, baptisms are decreasing and we don't know what will happen regarding baptisms following the Covid period. But whenever there is a crisis or one kind or another the Church is always the place to which people turn. The doors are always open and the clergy play

an important role. The Church is very involved in the cultural and political life of Norway.

The Church is criticised by those on the right for becoming what they describe as a left-wing church! But that is rather similar to the situation in England where they used to say that the Church of England was the Tory Party at prayer whereas now they say it is the Labour Party at prayer! We have a similar flavour in Norway and that, I think, is a good sign. We are standing up for the poor people, we are standing up for the refugees, we are standing up for human rights, and we are standing up for nature and the environment. We have an annual Synod Meeting. There is no House of Bishops as there is in England, and all decisions are made on an equal level, as it were. So the Church is fighting the good fight in the country. There is more that I could say about the Church of Norway today, but now I must stop. But I can have another short session later in the conference if anyone would like it.

There was indeed a further session the following day. It took the form of questions and answers and those attending enjoyed it very much.