

Norway makes another step in the long road to separating church and state

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The Norwegian Parliament is planning to amend the country's constitution on Monday to continue the long, drawn-out effort to separate the church from the state.

The amendment will abolish the Lutheran Church of Norway, which will then be renamed The People's Church.

The nation will have no official religion, and the government will not participate in the appointment of church deans and bishops. However, the church tax will remain in place and churches will continue to receive the lion's share, with humanist organisations benefitting to a lesser extent.

Svein Harberg, the spokesman for the Church, Education, and Research Committee stated that the decision "is historic both for the Norwegian Church and for the politicians in Parliament."

A parliamentary committee report presented on Tuesday contains a unanimous recommendation to move the church a step further away from the state – although there is still a long way to go to achieve complete separation.

According to the Norwegian Humanist Association's website (translated with Google Translate so open to misinterpretation):

"There will still be a church office in the government apparatus, and a minister who will be responsible for that department. It will continue to be the case that the employer has the responsibility for priests and "clerical" employees. There is in other words, no change. The state will not give the church the freedom to be a separate legal entity, as they wish. The requirement that the employees of the Department must be members of the Norwegian Church, however, is waived."

The amendment will remove the requirement for half of parliamentary members to be members of the Lutheran Church.

The state will no longer be responsible for the appointment of bishops and deans, something the church has been lobbying for over a long period. Instead, Norway will treat all religions and philosophies equally.

"The state will no longer engage in religious activities, but support the Norwegian church, national church and other religious and belief communities in line with it," reports NRK.

The unanimously supported amendments are expected to be formally passed on Monday

Traditionally, every citizen of Norway became a member of the Church of Norway upon baptism. 79 percent of Norwegians are registered members, but only about 20 percent make religion a large part of their lives and only two percent attend church regularly, according to 2009 and 2010 data. A 2002 study done by Gustafsson and Pettersson revealed that 72 percent of Norwegians

"do not believe in a personal God."

Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society, said: "On closer inspection, this turns out to be a far cry from the total separation that was initially heralded in some newspapers. But it is a step in the right direction and hopefully the process will continue – probably over decades.

"It would take the same kind of careful and gradual unravelling of our own state from the established church if there was ever a will to do it. If the process was ever begun, it would take generations to reach a proper conclusion to make Britain into a modern secular democracy."

Note: This is an amended version of an article that was originally published on Tuesday 15 May 2012

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