

## Faculty of Theology, University of Oslo

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# Program for Interreligious Studies – of religious change, rites and interfaith dialogue

In 1999, the Faculty of Theology decided that Interreligious Studies would be a priority concern in the years to come.

In the Norwegian context, the Faculty of Theology has a legacy of doing theology in dialogue with modern culture, and (as a Lutheran faculty) in ecumenical dialogue with other churches. During the last decades, Norway has become an increasingly pluralist and multireligious society. By defining Interreligious Studies a priority concern, the Faculty signals its intention to contribute more actively to multicultural and interreligious dialogues – by networking, new research and new courses.

### *Plurality, religious change and immigrant religion*

The new multireligious reality of Norway results from immigration and pluralizing processes among native Norwegians. Both factors has to do with globalization. But the new plurality corresponds also to processes of social liberation, particularly as reflected in the more visible roles played by women in religious change.

Immigration has made Islam and Buddhism in particular minority religions of considerable size in Norway. "Foreign" religions are no more foreign, but close neighbours. People belonging to Islam, Buddhism and other world religions contribute to religious change in the Norwegian society, but are also affected by pluralizing processes. Processes towards increased plurality are most widely felt within the Christian majority religion and the churches, which experience deep-going change and an ever more visible diversity. Pluralizing processes have also made non-confessional religiosity more widespread. Without necessarily joining a new religious movements, the individual believer selects pieces to his or her personal identity from different sources of Eastern or Western origin. Also secular humanism, which is both widespread and well-organized in Norway, continues to grow.

### *Identity, dialogue and rituals*

Increased diversity in beliefs and life stances entails new kinds of challenges to both local communities, social institutions, faith communities and public culture. Will religion be even more privatized and marginalized in public life, or do we witness the emergence of a civil society in which belief systems and life stances play an ever more important role? Some trajectories indicate that beliefs and life stances become markers of separation and themes of confrontation. But simultaneously, new doors are opened towards interaction, mutual influences and dialogue. Faith communities are faced with new and interreligious challenges in connection with marriages, funerals etc. One also sees examples of ritual practices across religious boundaries, in meditation movements and creative ritualizing.

How are faith communities and popular religiosity changed by the increased plurality in society? The Faculty of Theology wants to contribute more actively to the understanding of the cultural-religious features indicated above, and to a theological reflection of what takes place in the encounter between one's own faith and that of other believers. This includes missiological work on the role and task of the churches in a multireligious context.

### ***Challenges to school, churches and academic institutions***

One of the most important challenges arising from the new multireligious situation regards religious education in school. In Norway, public schooling comprises 98% of all primary and secondary school pupils. Members of the Faculty have played an active role in the formation of a new subject of religious education in public schools, which was implemented in 1997 under the cumbersome name "Knowledge of Christianity with Information about Religions and Life Stances" ("Kristendomskunnskap med religions- og livssynsorientering", KRL), and made compulsory. The intention behind the new subject has been to create a common arena for "identity and dialogue", and transmitting to new generations a cultural heritage which is still predominantly "Christian and humanist". The new subject has proved to be highly controversial in many camps. Public debates have revealed the inherent conflict potential in religious and cultural identities, especially when affected by majority-minority interests. But the new subject has also potentials for becoming an opportunity for interfaith learning. The Faculty of Theology wants to contribute actively towards making religion education in school an arena for widening of horizons, with respect of differences.

Although increasingly committed to interfaith issues in school, the primary focus of the Faculty will still be the Christian religion. Processes of change in the Christian religion, however, cannot be grasped unless one observes the interaction between Christianity, other world religions on Norwegian soil, non-confessional spirituality and more secular trends in culture. Although Lutheran Christianity formally comprises 88% of the Norwegian populace, the Faculty is also determined to develop its ecumenical commitment.

By educating students in Christian Religion and Theology for vocational service in school and church, the Faculty already makes a distinct contribution to processes of change. By means of new courses in interreligious studies and interfaith education, the Faculty reaches out for a wider spectrum of students who would like to qualify for entering interreligious dialogue in a reflected manner. Part of the vision behind our planned courses in this field is to create an academic arena for dialogue between students of different cultural and religious backgrounds.

### ***Approaching religious change, and what takes place "in between" religions***

Both in theology and religious studies, there is a tradition for teaching religions separately, and for doing research on faith communities and religions "one by one". Admittedly, comparative religion has long been an established discipline in religious studies. But in the Norwegian academic context, there is hardly any tradition for approaching the dynamic encounter *between* different religions and life stances.

As the first academic institution in Norway, the Faculty of Theology has introduced interreligious encounters and interfaith dialogue as an integral part of the curriculum of our introductory courses to Christian Religion and Theology. The intention of the Faculty is to

take new steps in the same direction, towards new courses, degrees and research in the field of interreligious studies.

Being a church-related, academic institution, the Faculty of Theology aims at linking the insider and outsider perspective in theology and religious studies. Religions should be approached both from the "inside" – as living sources of faith, morals and life orientation, and from the "outside" – as objects of critical investigation. Also in interreligious studies, a dialectic between the insider and outsider perspective must be sought for, with the double aim of both understanding *and* actively contributing towards a living encounter between faiths and convictions. In addition to interdisciplinary networking in the academic context, the Faculty would therefore like to involve also the faith communities in a cooperation centered around interreligious studies in Norway.

### ***Thematic focus, and the competence of the Faculty***

The Faculty of Theology has already a substantial competence in interreligious studies – in particular as regards Christian-Buddhist dialogue (professor Notto R. Thelle), Christian-Muslim encounters (Oddbjørn Leirvik, researcher), ritual studies (Jone Salomonsen, researcher) and non-confessional spirituality (Thelle, Salomonsen). The Faculty is also competent in other fields that are relevant to interreligious studies – such as multicultural approaches to the Bible, the relation between church history and the history of religions, religious change in modernity and gender perspectives on religion and theology (professor Kari Elisabeth Børresen holds a chair in feminist theology at the Faculty).

### ***The role of the Faculty in national and international networking***

The named researchers are all strongly involved in national as well as international networks within their respective fields.

During the 1990s, the Faculty of Theology has actively contributed to interdisciplinary networking focused on religion in school – between Theology and Religious Studies at university level, and Teacher Education in regional colleges and universities. In the field of Antiquity Studies, the Faculty runs a project together with the department for Religious Studies in Bergen. At the University of Oslo, much inter-disciplinary work has been done between Theology and Social Anthropology.

Internationally, the Faculty has initiated an "International Network in Advanced Theological Education" involving Lutheran theological institutions in four continents, and offers a Master Degree in Contextual Theology. The cue "contextual" signals the intention of the Faculty to do theology in awareness of and response to different social, cultural and religious contexts.

## **A PROGRAM FOR INTERRELIGIOUS STUDIES**

On the above background, the Faculty of Theology invites cooperation in the field of interreligious studies, with the aims of

- \* initiating new research

- \* introducing new courses and degrees in interreligious studies and interfaith education
- \* developing new courses for continued education
- \* interdisciplinary networking – between academic institutions, and between academic institutions and faith communities