

ORAL STATEMENT

United Nations Human Rights Council, 27th Session (8th – 26th September 2014)

Universal Periodic Review (UPR): Norway

Speaker: Imogen Schon

This statement is delivered with the support of the Norwegian Humanist Association¹.

We welcome the delegation and the report set out in front of us today. We commend Norway particularly for its human rights record on LGBTI issues and civil and political liberties. There are however, a couple of issues (with reference to the right to freedom of religion or belief and the rights of the child) we were sorry to see excluded from the review and recommendations so would thus like to raise them here.

Firstly, we are concerned about the following 2012 amendments to Norway's constitution: (i) the enshrining of the state church system, (ii) the requirement for the head of state to be a church member, and (iii) the anchoring of state values within a specific religious heritage. The Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief has consistently warned against connecting national identity to religion since it inherently excludes citizens of other faiths or convictions.

Accordingly, we recommend that both the Constitution's wording on religion, church and founding state values, should be revised with an aim to securing equality and non-discrimination.

Secondly, we are concerned by the government's attempts to amend the secondary school subject of Religion, Philosophies of Life (Life Stance) and Ethics (RLE) so that it explicitly incorporates Christianity in name and ensures that, at least 55% of the course taught covers Christianity. This, despite Norway having altered its religion and ethics school curricula previously in response to reservations expressed by the UN Committee on Human Rights.

In order to help realise children's rights to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, the CRC has recommended² that the State party conduct a study on how the aims of the revised school subject of RLE are achieved³.

We urge Norway to act on this recommendation. We also recommend that it abandon its plans to turn the broad subject of RLE into one with a one-dimensional Christian focus. If the proposed change is introduced, we hold that the state must, as a minimum, allow for a comprehensive opt out right, to secure religious freedom.

¹ <http://www.human.no/Service meny/English/>

² See CRC/C/NOR/CO/4, Section 4 (referencing articles 7, 8, 13 – 17 and 19 and 37, letter 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child), and §26.

³ These recommendations were supported by Children's Ombudsman, the Council of Religious and Life Stance Communities, and the Stålsett-Commission.