

The National Forum for Cooperation of  
Religions in Finland –  
CORE Forum

# Cooperation of religions in Nordic countries

– Present and challenges

---

Katri Kuusikallio & Aino Vihonen

USKOT - RESA - CORE



# COOPERATION OF RELIGIONS IN NORDIC COUNTRIES

– Present and challenges

© CORE Forum – The National Forum for Cooperation of Religions in Finland  
(USKOT-foorumi ry)  
Helsinki 2024

ISBN 978-952-65396-6-9 (paperback)  
ISBN 978-952-65396-7-6 (PDF)

Layout: Elina Iskala

# Content

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Religious Freedom Act</b>	<b>3</b>
Religious freedom	3
National church vs. state church	5
Freedom of speech vs. religious freedom act	6
Jyllands-Posten cartoons	7
Quran burnings	7
<b>Religious demography in the Nordic countries</b>	<b>8</b>
Abrahamic religions	8
Christianity	8
Islam	9
Judaism	10
Asian religions	11
Other religions	12
Life stance movements	13
<b>Relationships with the state</b>	<b>13</b>
Religions and their members' relationships with authorities	13
Challenges of registration	14
The role of ministries in the field of religion	15
Funding	17
Private Funding	19
<b>Interfaith cooperation</b>	<b>20</b>
Interfaith Dialogue Organizations	20
Member communities of dialogue organizations by religion	24
Interfaith Dialogue Efforts Outside of Official Organizations	25
Bilateral Interfaith Cooperation	25
Grassroot cooperation	26
Activities	27
Events	27
Social Media and Websites	28
Expertise	28
International activity	32
<b>Sources</b>	<b>33</b>
Literature	33
Websites	34
Attachments	35
Program of Nordic Visits	35

**Katri Kuusikallio, Aino Vihonen**

## **COOPERATION OF RELIGIONS IN NORDIC COUNTRIES**

### **Introduction**

From the beginning, the interfaith organization CORE Forum has maintained effective relationships with the officials responsible for religious freedom at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland. Religious freedom is a significant part of Finland's foreign policy and one of the fundamental pillars of a democratic society. Ambassador Timo Heino from the Ministry's Centre for Peace Mediation, in regular meetings with the Forum, has emphasized how the Nordic countries are pioneers in matters of religious freedom. An organized body like CORE Forum, now representing seven different religions, is quite unique in the world. Other Nordic countries also have active interfaith cooperation, but it is structured differently in each country.

The goal of CORE Forum is to nurture and promote societal peace by supporting dialogue, cooperation, and mutual respect between different religions. In 2023–2024, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs is supporting CORE Forum's project to strengthen Nordic interfaith dialogue. The aim of this project is to create a Nordic network of interfaith dialogue actors, which will strengthen national interfaith dialogue by increasing cooperation among Nordic interfaith dialogue actors.

Cooperation in the Nordic countries provides a model and experience for developing reconciliation processes globally. It also contributes to the understanding of different

religions and increases the accurate knowledge of religions among experts, politicians, and the general public. Interfaith dialogue helps find solutions to challenges in religious cooperation and to broader societal issues.

Effective interfaith cooperation reduces confrontation and disinformation. Religions can be seen as a positive resource and a factor that enhances resilience. In all areas of society where equality work is carried out, religions should also be addressed. Democracy is strengthened by amplifying the voices of minorities.

CORE Forum is building a Nordic network focused on interfaith dialogue and security. The Forum's representatives have visited all the Nordic countries and had discussions with interfaith dialogue actors, authorities, politicians, and representatives of religious minorities. CORE Forum will continue to coordinate the network's activities. In the future, the network will jointly design a Nordic cooperation model where the actors can come together across national and religious boundaries to discuss thematic issues in a safer and mutually respectful space.

CORE Forum's representatives visited Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland and gathered up-to-date information for this report. These other countries have commented on and supplemented their respective national data. At the invitation of CORE Forum, Master of Theology Aino Vihonen has gathered background material for this report and co-authored the text with CORE Forum's Executive Director Katri Kuusikallio.

## Religious Freedom Act

### Religious freedom

Religious freedom is a value considered a human right, but its implementation varies around the world. Religious diversity is becoming increasingly common in the Nordic countries, which makes its recognition an important part of assessing the realization of religious freedom. A broad positive religious freedom is part of the Nordic identity and is also closely linked to the close relationship between the state and religion. Religious freedom has been expanded in the Nordic countries since the

19th century, but its extent has varied over the years. By the end of the 20th century, religious freedom had been enshrined in the laws of every Nordic country.

*In Finland*, the Religious Freedom Act came into effect in 1923, granting the right to belong to or not belong to a religious community. Before the Religious Freedom Act, only foreigners had the right to belong to another religion, and Finnish citizens were required to belong to either the Evangelical Lutheran or the Orthodox Church, or another Protestant denomination.<sup>1</sup>

*In Sweden*, the Religious Freedom Act officially came into effect in 1951. The accepted Religious Freedom Act included both positive and negative religious freedom, meaning freedom from religion and the freedom to practice one's own religion. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Sweden is an old state church, and all citizens were expected to belong to it. As in all Nordic monarchies, the monarch must belong to the Lutheran national church. However, since the 18th century, there have been exceptions to the mandatory religion in Sweden.<sup>2</sup>

*In Norway*, other Christian churches were granted religious freedom in the Constitution of 1814. In 1964, the law was revised, and religious freedom was extended to cover all religions. The Religious Freedom Act was further supplemented in 1969 by the Religious Communities Act. Norway's Religious Freedom Act is based on international human rights declarations. Religious freedom is protected by criminal law and covers religious or ideological discrimination and hate speech. Norway's Defense Act, Article 35, also guarantees exemption for those whose beliefs or values conflict with military service.

*In Denmark*, the Religious Freedom Act has been in effect since the 1849 constitutional amendment. Denmark has a state church system, but it is referred to as the national church. The monarch must belong to the national church, but others are free to choose their religion. In 2018, legislation was revised regarding the registration and oversight of other religious communities, except for the national church. Registered communities are able to receive tax-exempt donations. The 2014 establishment of the Religious Community Committee in Parliament led to this

---

<sup>1</sup> Isto Peltomäki & Veli-Matti Salminen 2023, 6.

<sup>2</sup> Willander 2019, 12-13.

legislative change. The committee assessed the operating environment of religious actors and examined possibilities for improving transparency and funding. For example, foreign funding is not restricted but is closely monitored. In addition to politicians, researchers, religious leaders, and officials from various ministries were invited as experts to the committee. The legal reform improved financial transparency due to the reporting obligation required for registration.

*In Iceland*, the Religious Freedom Act is based on Denmark's 1849 Religious Freedom Act, as well as its law on the status of the Lutheran church as the state church. In the 11th century, the Icelandic parliament decided to make Christianity the official religion of the country, which was changed to Lutheranism in the 16th century due to the Reformation and Danish influence. Since Iceland is no longer a monarchy, neither its ruler nor the church minister is required to belong to the state church.<sup>3</sup>

## National church vs. state church

Nordic majority churches refer to themselves as national churches. This term highlights the distinction from the state church model and draws attention to the special relationship between religion and the nation. Nordic national churches are also characterized by ideological independence, even though their legal status remains connected to the state.<sup>4</sup>

All Nordic Lutheran churches have been state churches at some point in their history. Today, the state church model is only in place in Denmark and Iceland.<sup>5</sup> In the other Nordic countries, the state church model has been gradually abandoned: in Finland in the 1870s, in Sweden around the turn of the 21st century, and most recently in Norway in 2012. Despite this, the former state churches still retain a special status, including the right to collect taxes. In Finland, it is unique that there have been two state churches at the same time: the Lutheran and the Orthodox Church. Today, both function as national churches.

---

<sup>3</sup> Samband ríkis og kirkju [https://www.stjornarradid.is/media/forsaetisraduneyti-media/media/stjornarskra/Skyrsla\\_stjornlaganefndar\\_fyrri\\_bindi\\_Samband\\_rikis\\_og\\_kirkju.pdf](https://www.stjornarradid.is/media/forsaetisraduneyti-media/media/stjornarskra/Skyrsla_stjornlaganefndar_fyrri_bindi_Samband_rikis_og_kirkju.pdf) (read 8.2.2024)

<sup>4</sup> Ketola 2022, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Religion and non-religious convictions <https://www.government.is/topics/religion-and-non-religious-convictions/> (read 8.2.2024)

The RAS (Religion and State) dataset<sup>6</sup> examines the relationships between states and religions. According to it, all Nordic national churches can still be defined as state churches, except for Sweden, although Sweden's current system is very close to Finland's model. A state church is defined by the number and nature of laws governing religions, which are relatively low in the Nordic countries. Denmark has the most religion-related legislation, while Finland has the least. The biggest differences were seen in laws that discriminate against minorities, with Denmark, Sweden, and Norway receiving higher scores, and Finland and Iceland lower ones.<sup>7</sup>

As a term and practice, the national church also creates a tension between the cultural and religious roles of the Lutheran churches. Emphasizing the cultural role may weaken the emphasis on the religious role, and vice versa. "This can also prevent recognizing religiously unequal structures that may exist within the system."<sup>8</sup> Highlighting the special relationship between a particular religion and the nation places religions in different legal and rhetorical positions.

## Freedom of speech vs. religious freedom act

“[Finnish Criminal Code, Chapter 17, § 10 (24.7.1998/563)] Violation of religious peace: A person who 1) publicly blasphemes against God or, with intent to insult, publicly defames or desecrates what a church or religious community referred to in the Religious Freedom Act (267/1922) otherwise holds sacred, or 2) by making noise, behaving threateningly, or in some other way disturbs a religious service, ecclesiastical ceremony, or other such act of worship or funeral service, shall be sentenced to a fine or imprisonment for up to six months for violation of religious peace.”

The boundaries between freedom of speech and religious peace are intertwined. These boundaries are defined by state laws, which often emphasize either religious peace or freedom of speech. In Europe, the emphasis is often on freedom of speech, which allows for religious criticism but also the possibility of harassment. Finland has a Religious Peace Act, which is exceptional by Nordic standards. The Religious Peace Act covers offenses such as blasphemy and vandalism of religious buildings,

---

<sup>6</sup> “RAS is a project started in 2000 under the leadership of Jonathan Fox at Bar Ilan University in Ramat Gan, Israel. The aim of the project is to produce quantitative measures that can be used to systematically evaluate and compare the relations between the state and religions.” Ketola 2022, 17.

<sup>7</sup> Ketola 2022, 28.

<sup>8</sup> Ketola 2022, 16.



with penalties of fines or imprisonment. The United Nations Human Rights Committee has urged Finland to abolish this law, and its repeal has been a subject of debate in Finland. Most of the cases prosecuted in Finland relate to online texts, where hate speech is disguised as religious criticism. In Denmark, Norway, and Iceland, the Religious Peace Act was repealed during the 2010s, and in Sweden as early as the 1970s. During the 2010s, many countries revised their laws on religious peace to promote freedom of speech. However, in 2023, Denmark reinstated the Religious Peace Act due to incidents of Quran burnings.

## Jyllands-Posten cartoons

In all the Nordic countries except Finland, there have been incidents that disrupted societal peace, which laws like the Religious Peace Act might have prevented. The balance between freedom of speech and religious peace was tested in Denmark in 2005, when the newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published 12 caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad. Later, other international newspapers also published the cartoons. Of the Nordic countries, Finland was the only one where the press published the images only in the context of news reporting. The cartoons led to widespread protests both in Denmark and abroad, with many Muslims viewing the drawings as offensive, racist, and islamophobic. In discussions, the images have been compared to anti-Semitic cartoons from the 1930s. The charges brought in the Nordic countries following the publication of the images were dismissed in court on the grounds of freedom of speech. Iceland repealed its Religious Peace Act in 2015 in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo incident, in order to promote freedom of speech.

## Quran burnings

The public burning of the Quran is another incident that intersects with the Religious Peace Act. In Finland, such acts have not been publicly permitted, partly due to the Religious Peace Act. However, in 2023, Denmark, Sweden, and Norway have found themselves in the midst of controversies surrounding Quran burnings. These incidents have been perceived as having negative effects on societal peace, security, and international relations, while their allowance has ensured broad freedom of speech. In Sweden, in January 2023, Danish-Swedish far-right politician Rasmus Paludan burned a Quran outside the Turkish embassy in Stockholm. This act sparked a series of other Quran burnings in Denmark and Norway. In demonstrations

involving Quran burnings, permits must be obtained, and authorities primarily assess the security risks involved. In Norway, police canceled a Quran-burning demonstration organized by a far-right group due to security concerns. The Norwegian media chose not to highlight these events, allowing them to fade gradually. In Denmark, on the other hand, hundreds of demonstrations have taken place, during which Qurans have been destroyed. The public nature of these actions and their connection to protests have made it harder for authorities to grant permits.

Since Paludan's actions, others have followed suit by burning Qurans in Sweden, which has led to increased unrest and heightened domestic security threats. According to Sweden's Security Service, these incidents have also altered Sweden's global image, shifting it from a tolerant nation to one perceived as more hostile, particularly toward Islam and Muslims. These incidents have also contributed to delays in Sweden's NATO accession process.

## Religious demography in the Nordic countries

The traditionally Lutheran Nordic countries have experienced a significant increase in religious diversity over the past two decades. Immigration and refugee movements have led to the growth of non-Christian communities. While Christian and Jewish communities have long-standing roots, and in Finland, Muslims are also part of this historical tapestry, other religions, particularly those of Asian origin and Islam, have slowly increased since the 1990s. Some religious communities, however, were established earlier due to international connections and the conversion of individuals in the region. The lack of religious freedom in earlier times also influenced when various religious or life stance communities were founded.

### Abrahamic religions

#### Christianity

Christianity remains the majority religion in all Nordic countries. The Lutheran churches serve as state churches, and later national churches, forming the Christian majority in these nations. For instance, in Denmark, 74% of the population belongs to the Danish National Church, although membership has been declining due to

immigration, secularization, and individualization.<sup>9</sup> Despite this decline, more than half of the population in the Nordic countries still belong to a Lutheran church. The gradual increase in religious freedom since the 19th century has allowed other Christian churches to organize, including Catholic, Orthodox, and various Protestant churches such as Pentecostals.

Nordic Christians have established networks and ecumenical organizations aimed at fostering unity and cooperation among Christian denominations. These ecumenical organizations are part of the broader European ecumenical movement, with participation often involving long-established Christian communities, leaving newer Christian communities somewhat outside this cooperation.

## Islam

Islam is the second-largest religion in the Nordic countries after Christianity. Permanent Muslim communities first appeared in the region in the 19th century in Finland, where Tatar Muslims arrived from Russia. In the other Nordic countries, Islam grew in the late 20th century due to immigration and refugee flows. The most common countries of origin for Muslims in the Nordics are Turkey, Somalia, Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. Many Muslims are now second, third, or even fourth-generation immigrants, having lived their entire lives in the region.

The estimated number of Muslims varies due to registration difficulties, and official membership figures often underrepresent the actual numbers. For example, in Sweden, only around 242,000 people (2.3%) are registered as Muslims in 2020, though the actual number is likely much higher. In Finland, while official registration places the number of Muslims at 20,000, estimates range between 120,000–150,000. Denmark has approximately 260,000 Muslims (about 5% of the population), and Norway has around 180,000 registered Muslims.

There is no central organization representing all Muslim communities in any of the Nordic countries. Instead, activities are divided among different registered communities and their various networks. At least some of these are often involved in

---

<sup>9</sup> Religiøsitet og forholdet til folkekirken 2020 <https://www.fkuv.dk/undersogelser-og-viden/udgivelser-og-rapporter/religioesitet-og-forholdet-til-folkekirken-2020> (read 13.2.2024)

organized interfaith cooperation within their respective countries. Yasri Khan, Chairman of the Swedish Muslims for Peace and Justice, believes that this is due to Islam's internal divisions into different legal schools of thought.<sup>10</sup> However, the Islamic Association in Sweden includes six Islamic communities. The Islamic Council of Norway was established in 1993 after the Norwegian Church's Ecumenical Council requested several different Muslim organizations to form a central body that could serve as a representative dialogue partner for Muslims.<sup>11</sup> Norway also has the Muslim Dialogue Network, founded in 2017, aimed at promoting internal dialogue among Muslims. In Denmark, the Danish Muslim Union was founded in 2004 to safeguard the interests of Muslims in Danish society<sup>12</sup>. Iceland, like Finland, has several registered Islamic communities, but there is no active common umbrella organization. In Finland, SINE (the Finnish Islamic Council) operated until 2023. Now, there are several different Muslim organizations in Finland, such as the Union of Imams, the Union of Mosques, the Finnish Muslim Forum, the Forum of Young Muslims, Young Muslims, and Mahdi's Youth, but no single organization represents all Muslims.

## Judaism

Jewish communities, though small, have a long history in the Nordics. In Norway, the oldest Jewish community, Det Mosaiske Trossamfund, was registered in 1892, comprising about a third of Norway's Jewish population. Norway is home to around 2,000 Jews, though only 755 are registered as members.<sup>13</sup> Many Jews in Norway do not affiliate with any religious community. In Sweden, Jewish communities are organized under The Official Council of Swedish Jewish Communities, established in 1953, while in Finland, there are Jewish congregations in Helsinki and Turku. Denmark has several Jewish communities, and it is estimated that the country has about 7,000 Jews. Jewish communities in all Nordic countries have their own umbrella organizations.

---

<sup>10</sup> Khan 2017, 36.

<sup>11</sup> Galal, Liebmann & Nordin 2018, 334; Leirvik 2014, 264–266.

<sup>12</sup> Dansk Muslims Union - Historie. <https://dmunion.dk/dk/about-pages/historie/> (read 20.2.2024)

<sup>13</sup> Synagogen i 100. <https://jubileum.xn--jdedommen-18a.no/> (read 22.2.2024)

## Asian religions

Asian religions are also visible in Nordic interfaith cooperation. In this context, Asian religions include the Bahá'í Faith, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism.

Although these religions have relatively recent roots in the Nordic countries, they are active in national interfaith collaboration. Particularly, Bahá'ís and Buddhists are involved in interfaith cooperation in many Nordic countries.

The roots of Asian religions in the Nordic countries date back to the 20th century.

The Bahá'í Faith has the oldest presence among them, with connections to the United States, from where lecturers and converts to the Bahá'í Faith returned. Additionally, after the Iranian revolution, refugees from the region settled in the Nordic countries.

Buddhism is another Asian religion with a longer history in the Nordic region. For example, in Finland it arrived at the turn of the 20th century through Theosophists. Most members of Buddhist communities are immigrants who arrived in the Nordic countries starting from the 1970s. The same is true for Sikhism and Hinduism. Asian religions have grown in the Nordic countries partly due to an increase in labor migration. In Finland, for instance, the number of Hindus has grown due to work-related migration.

Most communities of Asian religions were registered in the latter half of the 20th century, although some organization existed earlier. The membership numbers of these religions vary, but the percentages relative to the total population are roughly the same across all Nordic countries. The Bahá'í Faith and Sikhism have small membership numbers, while Hinduism and Buddhism have significantly larger communities. Reported membership numbers differ depending on whether registered members are counted, the number of participants in the community, or the assumed religion of immigrants and their descendants from certain religious backgrounds. For example, many immigrants do not register with religious communities, which leads to a gap between official registration numbers and estimates, also in the case of Asian religions.

National umbrella organizations exist variably. Bahá'ís are a small community, so it is natural for them to operate as branches of the main community in each Nordic country. Buddhists are organized under umbrella organizations in Norway and

Sweden, which also manage state funding for their members. Hindus also have their own umbrella organization in Sweden, which is involved in the state's interfaith cooperation. In Finland, both Hindus and Buddhists have their own umbrella organizations.

## Other religions

Other religions referred to in this context include the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, pagan religious communities, Ahmadiyyas, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Of these, the first three are active in interfaith cooperation. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church or Mormon Church) has roots in Christianity but is considered a separate world religion due to doctrinal differences. LDS missionaries arrived in Scandinavia and Finland in the 1850s, establishing the first congregations. However, many emigrated to the United States either due to laws prohibiting religion or religious persecution. LDS Churches were registered as religious communities in the late 20th century in all the Nordic countries, except Denmark. Membership numbers are roughly the same across the Nordic countries, especially when proportionate to the population sizes. The LDS Churches are actively connected to national temples and are organized on a country-by-country basis. Ahmadiyyas are a religious community with roots in Pakistan and a Muslim background. The Ahmadiyya community identifies as Ahmadiyya Muslims, but there are disagreements among Muslims regarding whether they are considered part of Islam or a separate religion. Ahmadiyyas are active in interfaith cooperation in the Nordic countries, particularly in Finland and Norway.

Jehovah's Witnesses are not involved in interfaith cooperation. However, regarding issues of religious freedom, it should be noted that in 2021, Jehovah's Witnesses in Norway lost state support and their status as a registered religious community due to multiple violations of religious community laws. They lost their status because the movement's practice of shunning prevents the exercise of freedom of speech, meaning the community does not comply with the conditions for receiving support.

Various neo-pagan communities are also active in interfaith cooperation in Sweden and Iceland. Examples of these communities include Iceland's Ásatrúarfélagið and Sweden's Forn Sed. Neo-pagan communities, particularly those reviving old Nordic

traditions, have been part of interfaith cooperation. In Iceland, after Christian groups, the largest religious community is a group registered under the name Pagan Worship.<sup>14</sup> Other neo-pagan religious communities are also registered in other Nordic countries. In Finland, the registered religious community Karhun kansa (People of the Bear) operates, with its spiritual foundation rooted in the Finnic folk religion.

## Life stance movements

A notable feature of the religious and belief landscape in Norway and Iceland is the presence of humanists in interfaith cooperation. The registration and organization of humanist associations were driven by the desire to offer alternative rituals, such as naming ceremonies and funerals. The Ethical Humanist Association of Iceland and the Norwegian Humanist Association are both members of the International Humanist and Ethical Union. In Finland, the Finnish Humanist Association is affiliated with the Union of Freethinkers of Finland. Another belief system based on philosophy is holism, which is also active in religious and belief dialogue in Norway, where there are around 1,200 members. In Denmark, humanists are active in interfaith dialogue. In Finland, organizations representing belief systems, such as the Union of Freethinkers, have not been active in religious and belief dialogue. However, they do influence the direction of the dialogue field when discussing issues like the responsibility of the Evangelical Lutheran Church for burial services or equality between beliefs and religions. Culturally, religions may experience criticism, for example, due to the "Eroa kirkosta" (Leave the Church) website. Nevertheless, there have also been opportunities for cooperation between belief and religious communities in Finland. Relationships with the state

## Religions and their members' relationships with authorities

The relationships between religions and the state in the Nordic countries are quite close. Taxation rights, financial support, legislation, and education are part of the interaction between religious communities and the state. Although these relationships are similar, significant differences can be found regarding which ministry is

---

<sup>14</sup> Religious organisations <https://www.statice.is/statistics/society/culture/religious-organisations/> (read 8.2.2024)

responsible for relations between the state and religions. Ministries and religious communities also keep records of registered congregations and their membership numbers, but keeping these records up to date is challenging.

*In Iceland*, the registration of religious communities takes place under the Ministry of Justice, through the office responsible for religions and non-religious denominations. Due to its size, the city of Reykjavik plays a significant role in Iceland's interfaith dialogue field. For example, the city organizes round table meetings. *In Finland*, the Ministry of Education and Culture is responsible for registering religious communities and making decisions regarding religion. *In Denmark*, the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs (By- land- og kirkeministeriet) is responsible for registered religious communities. According to a representative of the Ministry, state oversight of religious communities is emphasized, particularly in reporting and monitoring foreign funding. *In Sweden*, the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs handles work related to religions, focusing on education and community funding. *In Norway*, the registration of religious and life stance communities is local. Registration applications are submitted to the authority responsible for the state administration in the relevant county.

## Challenges of registration

Mapping religious demographics in the Nordic countries is difficult, as none of these states collect religion-related data directly from their population. Instead, information about religious affiliation is based either on the religious community's own estimates and reports or on the membership numbers reported by government agencies responsible for supporting religious movements. The agencies only know the membership numbers of registered communities, and not all religious communities are registered with the authorities of their country. This may be due to several reasons, such as the perception that registration does not benefit the community, distrust of authorities, or a lack of knowledge about the process. Additionally, not all members of religious communities are necessarily registered with their community. The reasons for this are often overlapping. For example, distrust of authorities, the complexity of registration, lack of skills or knowledge may hinder both individuals and communities from registering. Communities may not encourage or guide their members to register, as they do not see it as beneficial. An individual may also want



to maintain the freedom to practice their religion or may not want to restrict themselves to one community through registration.

Membership in a religious community also does not necessarily reflect an individual's religiosity or religious identification. The data in this report are therefore estimates of the religious demographics in the Nordic countries to provide context for interfaith dialogue. It also maps majority-minority relationships between religions, which can be compared to the activity and participation of religions in interfaith cooperation.

For example, in Iceland, several issues arose regarding the registration of members of religious communities. On an individual level, both parents must separately register their child with a religious community. Under previous legislation, a child was automatically registered according to the mother's religion. With the increased complexity of registration, the records of religious community membership may now be less accurate than before. The state maintains a register of religious communities, but this information is shared with the communities only for a fee. As a result, not all religious communities are aware of their own membership.

## The role of ministries in the field of religion

The role and practices of ministries in the religious sphere vary by country. In *Sweden*, the Agency for Support to Faith Communities (SST), which operates under the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, has a broader responsibility for religious communities and their training, particularly in a Nordic context. The SST's origins trace back to the 1970s, although it was formally established as a government agency in 2000.<sup>15</sup> The shift to operating under the ministry is relatively recent, having occurred in 2017. SST works in multidisciplinary collaboration with various religious communities, acting as a bridge between them and the state. SST's responsibilities include providing financial and educational support to religious communities in Sweden. However, it does not register religious communities or track their membership numbers. The training it offers covers topics such as women's empowerment, capacity building within communities, generational differences, and leadership. SST brings religious communities together annually to share information

---

<sup>15</sup> Nordin 2020, 437.

on funding applications. It also has its own council that discusses security against national threats. SST's work is primarily directed from the ministry towards religious actors, as it does not issue statements on societal issues related to religion. However, the education and financial support it offers enable religious communities to grow and develop in line with democratic values. SST's educational efforts and preventive measures also extend to increasing religious literacy within society, not just providing training to religious communities.

In *Norway*, a department under the Ministry of Children and Families handles matters related to religious and life stance communities. This department is responsible for legislation governing religion and beliefs, which includes the law on religious communities, cemetery law, the law on the peace of holidays, and the fund law.<sup>16</sup>

In *Denmark*, alongside the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs, the Department for Religious and Belief Freedom at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Human Rights Division is involved in interfaith cooperation. The department primarily focuses on the international situation regarding religious freedom and promoting human rights-based religious freedom outside Denmark. Denmark places strong emphasis on religious freedom in its foreign projects and considers the role of religion in its international work. Religious freedom efforts are integrated into broader human rights and democracy initiatives. Another thematic focus at the Human Rights Division is gender equality and enhancing an intersectional understanding.

Inter-ministerial cooperation on human rights and religious freedom issues has become significant. Denmark's foreign and security policy strategy includes emphasizing the values of religious freedom as part of human rights. Similarly, the development policy strategy has seen nearly all parliamentary parties commit to promoting human rights-based values of religious freedom and maintaining discussions on current issues.

---

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dep/bfd/org/avdelinger/ftl/id752066/> (read 10.5.2024)

In *Iceland*, the Democracy Department of the City of Reykjavik is an active player, partly compensating for the state's role. This department aims to cooperate with Iceland's Interfaith Forum.

In *Finland*, several ministries are involved in work related to religion. The Ministry of Education and Culture is responsible for matters concerning religious freedom and, more recently, ecclesiastical affairs. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs approaches religious dialogue and religious freedom from a foreign policy perspective. The Ministry of the Interior takes into account issues related to overall security and the prevention of extremist movements. The Ministry of Justice deals with religion as part of developing ethnic relations, while the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment is responsible for integration.

## Funding

In *Denmark*, direct financial support is only provided to the state church. Grants can be applied for, but the complexity of the application and reporting processes often discourages small communities from seeking assistance. The office for recognized religious communities under the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs oversees the requirements and process for registering religious communities. It has also implemented a reform of the taxation rights for funds and donations aimed at religious communities and oversees state support received by religious communities. The allocation of funds emphasizes transparency, with reporting being a crucial part of the distribution process. Additionally, a forum under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has a funding source that provides support, regardless of religious background, mainly to non-governmental organizations. However, to receive this support, the project must be directed internationally. The ministry does not fund communities' religious, spiritual, or educational work.

In *Sweden*, the SST is responsible for state support to religious communities. Its primary task is to fund the activities of religious communities that promote peace and uphold values of equality and democracy in civil society. The social work done by these communities is considered valuable to society, which is why state support is extended to religious communities beyond just the Church of Sweden, which has a special right to tax its members. Crisis preparedness, the prevention of extremist

movements, and the integration of immigrants are also mentioned as motivations for funding.<sup>17</sup> Criteria for receiving funding include being a registered non-profit organization and having activities that are assessed to promote human rights and equality.<sup>18</sup> In 2018, SST produced a report on state support for religious communities, aimed at ensuring that the support meets both current and future needs. The report suggests that religious freedom should be viewed as the primary motive for state support of religious communities and that all communities should have equal conditions for religious activity.

In *Norway*, financial support for religious and life stance communities comes from the government. A community can apply for funding if it is registered and has at least 50 members. The amount of funding is determined based on a per-member basis, similar to the model used for the Church of Norway. There are no restrictions on how religious communities use the funding, allowing them to allocate it toward spiritual activities as they see fit, which is unusual for the Nordic countries. The state also provides an annual sum to STL, which distributes the funds to grassroots-level dialogue activities.

In *Finland*, the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Orthodox Church have the right to levy taxes. These communities collect tax revenue from their members through the state. Other religious communities do not have the right to receive income through member taxation. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland is legally obligated to take care of the country's burial services, for which it also receives financial compensation from the state. Registered religious communities can apply for state subsidies for their activities once a year, with a total of €524,000 distributed.<sup>19</sup> State grants are allocated based on the number of members in registered religious communities.

The Ministry of Education and Culture also directs financial assistance to promote interfaith dialogue, which can only be applied for by legal communities or

---

<sup>17</sup> Why grants to faith communities? - Myndigheten för stöd till trossamfund (myndighetenst.se) (read 8.12.2023).

<sup>18</sup> Erika Willander. 2019. The Religious Landscape of Sweden - Affinity, Affiliation and Diversity in the 21st Century, 15-16.

<sup>19</sup> Yleisavustus rekisteröityjen uskonnollisten yhdyskuntien toimintaan. <https://okm.fi/-/rekisteroityjen-uskonnollisten-yhdyskuntien-toiminta> (read 20.5.2024)

foundations. The Ministry of Justice has supported the CORE Forum with peace organization funding, but on April 25, 2024, the Finnish government decided to discontinue general peace work funding starting in 2025. Peace education has only been discontinued once before, in 1934. Finnish organizations have been actively involved in work that has been awarded Nobel Peace Prizes.

In *Iceland*, all registered communities have the right to a share of their members' income taxes, not just the state church, as is the case in other Nordic countries.<sup>20</sup> The amount of tax revenue and subsidies received depends on the number of members registered with the community. Those not affiliated with religious communities are taxed similarly, but the proceeds are allocated to other public-benefit activities, such as funding universities. In Iceland, there is concern about the potential misuse of religion to increase racial and social distrust. The possibility of money laundering involving religious communities requires closer monitoring, but support for the communities is also necessary. A working group examining Iceland's human rights program has raised this as an issue that reduces equality between religious and non-religious groups.

## Private Funding

Funding from abroad is also common, particularly among Muslim communities, which receive financing from abroad, including the Middle East. Attitudes towards foreign funding vary across the Nordic countries. Transparency in foreign funding is considered important, but some view it with suspicion, fearing that external influences may change the operations of religious communities. For example, plans for a grand mosque in Finland were ultimately canceled due to concerns about the extent of its funding ties to the Middle East. Authorities are also tasked with monitoring the funding of registered religious communities. While it is difficult to track, ministries encourage transparency among communities. Private funding also supports interfaith dialogue work. For instance, Resam, an interfaith dialogue organization in Denmark, is entirely privately funded. In Norway, private funding is monitored if it exceeds €5,000 annually. In such cases, the community must register

---

<sup>20</sup> Religion and non-religious convictions. <https://www.government.is/topics/religion-and-non-religious-convictions/> (read 8.2.2024)

the origin of the funds. A state official overseeing the funding can initiate further investigation of the funding source if necessary.

## Interfaith cooperation

Nordic interfaith organizations share common goals in promoting equal treatment of religions and beliefs, as well as fostering mutual respect and understanding between them. Decision-making in these organizations is done collectively, regardless of the differing membership sizes of the communities involved. Some organizations operate independently, some are associated with national churches, and others function under government ministries. Interfaith cooperation and dialogue also occur bilaterally or trilaterally, with Christians, Muslims, and Jews often being the most active participants. This cooperation takes place both at the national and local levels, with varying target groups, ranging from grassroots communities and religious leaders to the general public, policymakers, and the media. A recurring challenge in interfaith dialogue activities is insufficient funding relative to demand.

## Interfaith Dialogue Organizations

In *Finland*, interfaith dialogue activities are organized by the CORE Forum, which originated from an initiative by President Tarja Halonen in 2001, following the terrorist attacks on September 11 in the United States. The CORE Forum association was officially established in 2011. The forum's funding comes from member communities, the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, and various foundations. It is also seeking EU grants. The CORE Forum fosters societal peace by promoting interfaith dialogue, cooperation, and mutual respect. Freedom of religion and the right to practice one's faith and live according to it, along with defending the equal rights of all religions, are fundamental to a democratic society. Religions share core values of peace, understanding, and responsibility. The Forum collaborates with authorities, serves as an expert on religious issues, engages in public discourse, and organizes various events. It strives to highlight the visible role of religion in everyday life and to promote the visibility of religious representatives as active participants in society, showcasing religion as a societal asset. The Forum holds several significant

representative positions in government bodies and is frequently requested to provide statements.

Initially, the forum focused on dialogue among the Abrahamic religions, but since 2019 it has expanded to include seven religions and their various denominations. In recent years, the focus has been on increasing religious literacy in society. This work amplifies minority voices while advancing common religious goals. Religious education in schools has been a central theme from the beginning. Other societal issues where religious perspectives are sought include equality, security, religious freedom as a foreign policy issue, human rights, integration, and combating racism. The Forum's work spans across multiple ministries. The Ministry of Education and Culture is responsible for religious freedom and therefore funds the majority of the Forum's work. However, the funding is limited in relation to demand and the organization's capacity.

In *Norway*, interfaith cooperation began in the 1970s through individual activists' initiatives. It became more organized in the 1990s when major religious communities started participating. The Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities (Samarbeidsrådet for tros- og livssynssamfunn, STL) was founded in 1996 as a protest against a new compulsory school subject introduced by the state. This subject combined two previously separate subjects, which were similar to Finland's subjects on religion and secular ethics, but placed a greater emphasis on Christianity at the expense of other beliefs. This led many religious and life stance communities to protest that their views were not adequately considered in the curriculum.

The state's relationship with the interfaith organization is one of mutual trust. Cooperation with STL operates through the Ministry of Children and Families, with a clear division of responsibilities and mutual confidence. The ministry assigns tasks to the organization, which maintains its independence. STL criticizes the ministry when necessary while serving as the government's link to religious and belief communities. Interfaith cooperation is thus part of the state's contingency planning, with the ministry viewing it as peacebuilding, as it is believed to reduce conflicts and promote social harmony.

In *Sweden*, umbrella organizations of religious communities collaborate within the Swedish Interreligious Council (Sveriges interreligiösa råd, SIR). SIR operates independently but, due to limited resources, relies on support from the Church of Sweden. It was established in 2010 as a meeting place for religious leaders. The goal is to share knowledge about religions and create a forum for discussing the role of religion in society. The council gathers around common themes, such as peace, environmental issues, and grassroots activism. Additionally, it organizes grassroots-level activities. SIR's operations have been weak in recent times due to a lack of funding and resources.

*Denmark* does not have a comprehensive interfaith dialogue organization. The close connection between the Evangelical-Lutheran Church and the state has led it to focus on the international ecumenical movement, slowing the establishment of national cooperative bodies. The Danish church has an office responsible for interfaith dialogue. This is also reflected in the fact that the clear changes in Denmark's religious landscape have not yet led to the creation of national cooperative structures, although it has generated local cooperation projects and sparked academic interest in interfaith dialogue. Resam serves as a forum for interfaith dialogue in Denmark, bringing together religious leaders from Christianity, Islam, and Judaism to discuss theological and societal topics and challenges. The organization is not an advocacy group but aims for values-based leadership through communication, events, and advocacy. Established in 2017, it is privately funded. Its activities are based on globally produced background materials, on which religious leaders engage in discussions 4-5 times a year. Resam seeks to bridge the gap between discussions among religious communities and their leaders.<sup>21</sup> In the Nordic context, Resam is unique as its activities stem from traditional theological discussion and value-based advocacy rather than societal discourse.

In *Iceland*, the Interfaith Forum of Iceland was established in the early 2000s and formally founded in 2006 based on a joint declaration prepared and signed by religious actors in the presence of the President of Iceland. The network has been meeting informally since then. Although the Forum has garnered interest and support from the Office of the President, it remains an informal discussion venue without a

---

<sup>21</sup> Om Resam. <https://resam.dk/om-resam/> (read 7.2.2024)



designated chairperson. On the other hand, the formation of the Forum was not entirely unstructured. It is open to all religious and life stance communities in Iceland, whether they are registered with the Ministry of Justice or not. The Forum's declarations are accepted by all its members. Its informal and friendly atmosphere during gatherings promotes an open-minded composition. However, relationships between some communities within the network are strained, and cooperation is highly tense and politicized. The network does not have direct, established, or regular connections with authorities or the media. Due to the low level of organization and limited resources among religious actors, ensuring equality and representation within the network is challenging.

Reykjavik's Department of Human Rights and Democracy also oversees a working group that meets once a year to increase religious representation in decision-making processes. The working group monitors the city's human rights program, and its meetings have raised a few issues regarding the program's implementation.

## Member communities of dialogue organizations by religion

The members of organizations focused on interfaith cooperation in the Nordic countries, listed from the oldest to the newest:

(x = founding member, y = joined later (year))

<b>Religion / Country</b>	<b>Norway (STL) 1996</b>	<b>Finland (CORE) 2001</b>	<b>Iceland (Forum for Interfaith Dialogue) 2002</b>	<b>Sweden (SIR) 2010</b>	<b>Denmark (no comparable organization)</b>
<b>Christianity</b>	x	x	x	x	
<b>Islam</b>	y (2019)	x	x	x	
<b>Judaism</b>	x	x	x	x	
<b>Buddhism</b>	x	y (2022)	x	x	
<b>Bahá'ís</b>	x	y (2024)	x	x	
<b>The Sikhs</b>	y (2002)			x	
<b>LDS Church</b>	y (2003)	y (2022)	x	y (2020)	
<b>Humanists</b>	x		x		
<b>Holists</b>	x				
<b>Hinduism</b>	y (2001)	y (2022)		y (2020)	
<b>Mandaeanism</b>				y (2020)	
<b>Ahmadiyyas</b>	x (2019)	(y)	x		
<b>Alavites</b>				y (2020)	
<b>Folk belief background / others</b>			Icelandic Ethical Humanist Association, Ascetic Association, Dialectical materialism	y (2020) Forn Sed	

All Abrahamic religions have been involved as founding members in the establishment of Nordic interfaith cooperation organizations. Christian representation typically includes both national churches and ecumenical organizations. Despite the small size of Jewish communities, they have long been part of the religious landscape in the Nordic countries and thus actively participate in interfaith dialogue. The growing presence of Muslims in the Nordic region makes their active involvement in interfaith activities particularly significant. However, a challenge arises from the fragmentation of Muslim communities, making it difficult to identify a comprehensive and representative spokesperson. As a result, several different Muslim communities are often involved. Noteworthy within the Nordic context is the participation of the Ahmadiyya community in Norway and the Alawite community in Sweden in interfaith dialogue efforts. In Finland, Ahmadiyyas are involved in various committees and event organizing. The creation of umbrella organizations for Muslim communities is also hindered by a lack of funding and its irregularity.

In addition to the Abrahamic religions, a wide range of other religions are involved in interfaith dialogue organizations. Norway and Sweden's interfaith dialogue organizations are the most comprehensive, though Sweden's organization has seen a decline and now primarily operates under the Church of Sweden. In terms of inclusivity, notable examples include the involvement of Humanist associations in Norway and Iceland, as well as folk religion communities from Sweden and Iceland participating in interfaith dialogue efforts. Denmark lacks a national interfaith dialogue organization focusing on advocacy and dialogue across multiple religions, and it wasn't until CORE Forum's visit that they gathered for the first time in a diverse religious and ideological composition. In Iceland, the interfaith group also collaborates with the Department of Religious Studies at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Iceland.

## Interfaith dialogue efforts outside of official organizations

### Bilateral interfaith cooperation

Formal interfaith dialogue began in Sweden in 1979 when the Council of Christians and Jews started its activities. In the following decade, Muslims joined the effort.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Galal, Liebmann & Nordin 2018, 335.

Sweden is also home to smaller-scale initiatives, such as the Jewish-Muslim dialogue organization Amanah, founded in Malmö in 2017. Its goal is to reduce islamophobia and antisemitism among the city's youth.<sup>23</sup> In other Nordic countries, no specific Jewish-Muslim dialogue organization has emerged.

Another noteworthy initiative is the Christian-Muslim Forum in Denmark, consisting of leaders and social actors from both faiths. Its board includes ten members, half of whom are Christians and the other half Muslims. It was established in 2006 following the cartoon crisis. The Forum organizes an annual conference for interaction between these two religions and is facilitated by the Danish National Church's interfaith office.

## Grassroot cooperation

In Denmark, interfaith dialogue is primarily at the local level. Like the Danish Church, the interfaith work it organizes is community-driven, leading to numerous groups and projects. For instance, in Copenhagen, the chairperson of the Danish Muslim Union and a local Christian pastor jointly organize grassroots interfaith activities. Their initiative involves celebrating each other's religious holidays, visiting churches and mosques, and meeting regularly. There is also an interest in collaborative social work to improve living conditions in the area and foster dialogue. They have avoided seeking publicity for the project due to widespread prejudice against the neighborhood and interfaith cooperation. Especially in the wake of Quran burnings, all attention on religion is perceived as risky and easily misunderstood. Security concerns must also be considered due to prejudices. Part of the reason for avoiding publicity is that locally driven and community-based dialogue does not require promotion beyond the involved groups.

In Norway, several local groups operate under STL in different cities. These groups organize events, provide education, and work with municipalities and cities to foster dialogue. Sweden's SIR also has local activities, although the local groups are not listed, but interested parties can join through contact or register their own group's activities<sup>24</sup>.

---

<sup>23</sup> Myndigheten för stöd till trossamfund Årsbok 2018, 8–11.

<sup>24</sup> Lokala interreligiösa initiativ. <https://interreligiosaradet.se/lokala-interreligiösa-initiativ/> (read 13.5.2024)

## Activities

The objectives of all interfaith dialogue organizations include increasing social harmony, promoting religious and ideological equality, and facilitating dialogue between different religions. These organizations primarily achieve these goals through events, expert contributions, and publications. During meetings, various societal themes were discussed, some of which are recurring across Nordic countries. These themes include religious education, peace related to religious faith, circumcision, burial practices, the right to officiate weddings, and the registration of religious communities. Islamophobia and antisemitism have been highlighted as rising issues both locally and across Europe, and the situation is considered serious and expanding. Discussions also touched on immigration, its successes and consequences, and the growing segregation in Sweden.

During travels to Nordic countries, issues such as Quran burnings, the politicization of religion, restrictions on religious ceremonies, administrative challenges in registration and community management, polarization, racism, and the rise of islamophobia and antisemitism were especially prominent. In Denmark, there was a desire for better organization of interfaith dialogue, with challenges in reaching the diverse religious communities. The lack of unified organization within religions, where not all communities fall under a single organization, also poses challenges. Generational changes also bring shifts in the structures of religious communities. Relationships between Muslims and Jews and the rise of antisemitism and islamophobia were also recurring themes. The low religious literacy among politicians was another issue that came up.

## Events

Interfaith dialogue organizations organize a variety of events, which can be administrative, communal, societal, or educational. Communal events bring together representatives from different religions for grassroots dialogue and networking, while societal events often address current affairs. Educational events provide learning opportunities for religious representatives. Along with council and board meetings, workshops, conferences, lectures, and visits are also held.

National activities often take place in the capitals of these countries. In Norway and Denmark, there are also active local activities, particularly in individual cities, focusing on interfaith dialogue. The emphasis of events varies, from enabling grassroots dialogue to promoting civic engagement and collaboration with ministries. The training organized by interfaith dialogue organizations opens perspectives on interreligious dialogue. For example, in Sweden, SIR's training sessions covered the impact of post-colonialism on interfaith relations, security, and conflict resolution models.<sup>25</sup>

## Social Media and Websites

Interfaith dialogue organizations like Finland's CORE Forum, Norway's STL, Sweden's SST and SIR, and Denmark's Resam maintain active websites. On social media, Finland's CORE Forum and Norway's STL are active, while Sweden operates through SIR. Finland and Norway have interfaith calendars maintained by local interfaith organizations, while Sweden's SST also publishes a file listing religious holidays at the start of the year. SST and STL have also included holist holidays in their calendars among the religious holidays. The funding and scale of interfaith dialogue organizations vary across the Nordic countries, affecting the number of paid staff, with some activities relying on volunteers, making operations irregular at times.

## Expertise

Expertise is a key part of the work of interfaith dialogue organizations, including reports, articles, hearings, statements, and educational guides. These organizations serve as expert bodies on decisions concerning religion and collaborate with research institutes, the state, and municipalities. Interfaith dialogue organizations, particularly in Finland, Sweden, and Norway, publish summaries of discussions on various topics on their websites. Topics often relate to current events such as recent wars or Quran burnings, but longer-term discussions, such as those on sexual minorities and domestic violence, also arise. Publications from broad interfaith networks bring the responses and actions of smaller, often overlooked communities to a wider audience.

---

<sup>25</sup> <https://interreligiosaradet.se/aktuellt/hoppfullt-i-var-polariserade-tid/> (read 11.5.2024)

Several statements have been made in the Nordic countries about the state of *religious freedom*. In Iceland, a working group reviewing Reykjavik's human rights program raised concerns about religious and non-religious equality, highlighting that only the state church can own land. Although a local Islamic community has been granted a plot based on equality, it has not received a building permit. Other issues include events combining religion and public spaces, such as religious education in schools and religious celebrations, where schools are not obligated to provide alternative activities for non-religious students. Additionally, religious education is banned in Icelandic schools, prompting concern about the lack of development in religious literacy.

In Norway, STL was involved in preparing new religious freedom laws following the dissolution of the state church model. The shift from a state church system marked a change for STL, as the previous model, which was criticized for its inequality, transitioned to more inclusive treatment of religions and beliefs. STL helped shape the new equal rights law for religious and life stance communities. In its 25th anniversary publication (2022), STL reported on the progress of transitioning from a state church to a more open society of worldviews.

*Religious literacy* has only been formally addressed in Finland, though many issues discussed by interfaith dialogue organizations in other countries are part of religious literacy as well. Religious literacy encompasses basic knowledge of different religions, facilitating encounters between people of diverse religious backgrounds. As religious diversity increases across all Nordic countries, the development and maintenance of religious literacy are crucial. Finland's CORE Forum has also published a guide on religious literacy. The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment has requested statements on integration, highlighting the importance of religious literacy.

*Immigration* has been a relevant topic in interfaith dialogue for decades. In Norway, the Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities (STL) published a guide in 2016 for those working with refugees and asylum seekers, aiming to better prepare them for welcoming individuals from different religious backgrounds to Norway. The guide explains Norwegian culture and customs, particularly in terms of the relationship between religion and the workplace, as well as the importance of

religious freedom. In Finland, the CORE Forum issued a statement in 2023 on the significance of religious beliefs in integration. The statement calls for an amendment to the law that promotes integration, emphasizing the right to practice one's own religion, in the same way that the right to one's own language and culture is recognized. Religious beliefs should be seen as a strength in the integration of immigrants. During a visit to Iceland, a discrepancy in the realization of equality among religions was highlighted. In the case of immigrants, the national registration forms do not have a section for registering religion, even though, based on network outreach, it had been promised for years that this option would be added voluntarily. Meanwhile, certain financial benefits are granted to communities based on their membership numbers.

*Hate speech, discrimination, and racism*, particularly in the form of antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred, were prominent in discussions. Norway's STL issued a statement on antisemitism (2024) in response to rising hate speech following the October 7 attack, emphasizing the importance of religious expression without fear of hostile reactions. Fighting hate speech is crucial in political collaboration. STL stresses that criticism of religion or philosophy is not synonymous with hate speech and calls on politicians, especially leaders of majority groups, to take responsibility in this matter. In Finland, the Prime Minister's Office includes a working group with various religious groups developing an action plan against racism, with CORE Forum engaging with its planners.

*The Israel-Palestine conflict* is a frequent topic in the work of Nordic interfaith cooperation. Dialogue organizations in Norway and Finland have made clear statements on the situation, particularly concerning the suffering of civilians. These statements advocate for peace and highlight the emotions involved, which may lead to local polarization in the form of antisemitism and anti-Muslim sentiments. Escalation of the conflict into war often leads to disinformation and hate speech. The Norwegian STL has also issued a more general statement on the events of October and their consequences, explaining the situation from the perspective of STL and interfaith dialogue.

There was little discussion about the war in Ukraine, but the consequences of Russia's invasion for local religious actors and their members have been discussed, at



least within Norway's STL. It was highlighted that collective blame does not help resolve the situation, but rather exacerbates tensions locally and complicates finding a solution. In Finland's statement on Ukraine, all violence committed in the name of religion is condemned, and no individual should be blamed for the events.

*Quran burnings* have been discussed by Nordic interfaith dialogue organizations. While public statements and official positions have only been issued by Sweden's SIR, their statement (2023) emphasizes the protection of free speech while also recognizing the growing hatred. The statement also highlights children's rights to practice their faith without fear, the incitement of ethnic groups, and the fear and polarization sparked by these incidents. At the same time, satisfaction is expressed with the Foreign Minister's international statements against islamophobia. These issues are also connected to hate speech and harassment directed at religions and their representatives. For example, in Finland, the CORE Forum highlights and condemns local acts of vandalism against mosques. The CORE Forum has frequently spoken out against racism and the rising trends of antisemitism and anti-Muslim sentiment.

*Sexual and gender minorities* have been a topic in publications by interfaith dialogue organizations in several Nordic countries. In Norway, the core message of the statement was tolerance for different perspectives, engaging in dialogue at a common table, and avoiding violence. In Finland, the Parliament's Legal Affairs Committee requested a statement from the CORE Forum regarding a citizen's initiative to ban conversion therapies. Some gaps in the committee's legal proposal terminology were highlighted. The key message of the published statement is that freedom of religion and the fundamental and human rights of LGBTQ+ people do not contradict each other but can be reconciled. The CORE Forum organized a seminar on the topic. Iceland's interfaith dialogue forum is set to address issues related to LGBTQ+ and sexual education.

*Domestic violence* has been addressed in Norway. The first public statement on the topic dates to 2009, but the organization still considers the issue relevant. The core message of the statement is that violence should not be justified by religion or culture. In cases of domestic violence, everyone suffers, but women and children are particularly affected. Religious and life stance leaders have a duty to prevent such

actions. In Finland, the CORE Forum has repeatedly advocated for adherence to the Istanbul Convention.

In 2023, STL in Norway addressed *religious community meeting spaces*, publishing a guide for religious and life stance communities. The guide provides advice on the regulations related to the use and safety of spaces, as well as how to find and fund them.

## International activity

International activity is still a relatively small part of Nordic interfaith dialogue organizations. However, the situation is different in Norway, where STL's international work led to the establishment of the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion and Belief in 1998. The Coalition aims to promote religious freedom, minority rights, and interfaith dialogue worldwide.<sup>26</sup> It operates as part of the Human Rights Center's international division at the University of Oslo and is known for the Oslo Declaration on Freedom of Religion or Belief (1998). As an expert organization, it publishes extensive material on religious freedom issues and participates in several international projects. In Denmark, religious freedom is closely tied to projects run by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and strong religious freedom is seen as a Danish export.

In Finland, the CORE Forum is a member of the Religious and Traditional Peacemakers Network and the Religions for Peace network, connecting its work to a global movement promoting interfaith dialogue. The Forum also maintains bilateral relations with several countries in this field and regularly hosts visitors from all continents. Representatives of the Forum participated in the Council of Europe seminars on religious freedom in Strasbourg in 2022 and in Berlin in 2024.

---

<sup>26</sup> Eidsvåg, Lindholm & Sveen 2004, 788–789; Leirvik 2014, 273.

# Sources

## Literature

- Árnason, Ágúst Þór (n.d.). Assessment of state-church relations. Constitutional Committee. [Samband ríkis og kirkju](#).
- Eidsvåg, Inge, Tore Lindholm & Barbro Sveen (2004). The Emergence of Interfaith Dialogue: The Norwegian Experience. *Facilitating Freedom of Religion or Belief: A Deskbook*. Toim. Tore Lindholm, W. Cole Durham Jr. & Bahia Tahzib-Lie. 777–789.
- Galal, Lise Paulsen (2020). Between Representation and Subjectivity Interreligious Dialogue in Denmark. *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society*, 6 (2020) 449–472. DOI:[10.30965/23642807-00602011](#)
- Galal, Lise Paulsen, Louise Lund Liebmann & Magdalena Nordin (2018). Routes and relations in Scandinavian interfaith forums: Governance of religious diversity by states and majority churches. *Social Compass* 2018, Vol. 65(3) 329–345. DOI:[10.1177/0037768618787239](#)
- Ketola, Kimmo (2022). Suomalainen uskonto-lainsäädäntö sekä uskonnon ja valtion väliset suhteet kansainvälisessä vertailussa. In Kirkko yhteiskunnassa: suhteet ja rajapinnat - Uskonnonvapauslaki 100 vuotta. Isto Peltomäki & Veli-Matti Salminen (eds.). Suomen ev.-lut. kirkon tutkimusjulkaisuja 143. Suomalaisen Teologisen Kirjallisuusseuran julkaisuja 303.
- Khan, Yasri (2017). Ingen hållbar och god frett utan rättvisa. *Fred i religionens namn! En interreligiös fredsantologi*. Eds. Henrik Rosén & Elias Carlberg. Sveriges kristna råd, Sveriges interreligiösa råd. 43–53.
- Leirvik, Oddbørn (2014). Interreligious Dialogue and Secularity: The Secular as Non-Hegemonic Condition. *Secular and Sacred: The Scandinavian Case of Religion in Human Rights, Law and Public Space*. Toim. Jóse Casanova, Rosemarie Van der Bremer & Trygve Wyller. 261–277.
- Nordin, Magdalena, Galal, L. P., & Liebmann, L. L. (2017). Routes and Relations between Folk Churches' and Interfaith Initiatives in Scandinavia: Governance, Secularism and the Making of Public Religion. Paper presented at ISSR/SISR, Lausanne, Switzerland.
- Nordin, Magdalena (2020). How to Understand Interreligious Dialogue in Sweden in Relation to the Socio-Cultural Context. *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society*, 6 (2020) 429–447. DOI:[10.30965/23642807-00602010](#)
- Nordin, Magdalena (2023). Migration, religion och integration. Delmi kunskapsöversikt 2023:2.

<https://www.delmi.se/media/13ma2ow1/migration-religion-och-integration.pdf>.

Peltomäki, Isto & Salminen, Veli-Matti (2023). Kirkon yhteiskunnallisen aseman tutkimus ja uskonnonvapauden kehitys. In Kirkko yhteiskunnassa: suhteet ja rajapinnat - Uskonnonvapauslaki 100 vuotta. Isto Peltomäki & Veli-Matti Salminen (eds.). Suomen ev.-lut. kirkon tutkimusjulkaisuja 143. Suomalaisen Teologisen Kirjallisuusseuran julkaisuja 303.

Willander, Erika (2019). The Religious Landscape of Sweden - Affinity, Affiliation and Diversity in the 21st Century.

## Websites

### Sweden

Sveriges interreligiösa råd

<https://interreligiosaradet.se/>

SST Myndigheten för stöd till trossamfund

<https://www.myndighetensst.se/>

Amanah

<https://amanah.se/>

### Norway

Samarbeidsrådet for tros- og livssynssamfunn

<https://stl.no/>

Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion and Belief

<https://www.jus.uio.no/smr/english/about/id/oslocoalition/>

Synagogen i 100

<https://jubileum.xn--jdedommen-18a.no/>

Forbruker-, tros- og livssynsavdelingen

<https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dep/bfd/org/avdelinger/ftl/id752066/>

### Denmark

Folkekirke og Religionsmøde

<https://religionsmoede.dk/english>

Resam – Religion og Samfund

<https://resam.dk/>

Center for Sameksistens – Islamisk-Kristent Studiecenter

<https://www.ikstudiecenter.com/>

Tro i Harmoni

<https://troiharmoni.dk/>

Danish Forum for Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB)

<https://um.dk/en/foreign-policy/office-of-the-special-representative-for-freedom-of-religions-or-belief/danish-forum-for-freedom-of-religion-or-belief>

Danish Muslim union

<https://dmunion.dk/dk/about-pages/historie/>

## **Iceland**

Government of Iceland

<https://www.government.is/topics/religion-and-non-religious-convictions/>

Statistics Iceland

<https://www.statice.is/statistics/society/culture/religious-organisations/>

## **Finland**

CORE Forum

[uskot.fi](http://uskot.fi)

Ministry of Education and Culture

<https://okm.fi/-/uskontojen-vuoropuhelun-edistaminen>

<https://okm.fi/-/rekisteroityjen-uskonnollisten-yhdyskuntien-toiminta>

## **Attachments**

### **Program of Nordic Visits**

**In Stockholm**, Chair Heikki Huttunen and Executive Director Katri Kuusikallio:

The Swedish Agency for Support for Faith Communities / Ministry of Health and Social Affairs: Hasnain Govani, Project Manager, and Isak Reichel, Director.

In Parliament: Member of Parliament (Green Party, Somali-born Muslim) Leila Ali Elmi.

The Interfaith Council of Sweden: Sofia Camnerin, Vice-Chair (Secretary General of the Christian Council of Sweden), Rev. Maria Kjellsdotter Rydinger, Coordinator.

Embassy of Finland: Janne Jokinen, Deputy Head of Mission.

The World Jewish Congress: Petra Khan Nord, Representative and Member of the Interfaith Council of Sweden.

**Malmö:** Email negotiations took place, but no meeting was held due to interruptions in interfaith cooperation.

**In Oslo,** Vice-Chair of the Forum Gölten Bedretdin and Executive Director Katri Kuusikallio:

Samarbeidsrådet for tros- og livssynssamfunn (STL)  
Ingrid Joys Rosendorf, Secretary General, and Anders Garbom Björklund,  
Political Advisor.

STL Council Meeting: Two Hindus, a Catholic, two Lutherans, two representatives from the Humanist Association, and two from the Holistic Association were present.

Ministry of Children and Families: Discussion on interfaith dialogue and policies on religion and life-stance with Ellen Ur and Irene T. Wangen.

Norwegian Humanist Association: Trond Enger.

**In Copenhagen,** Chair Heikki Huttunen, Board Member Laura Huovinen, and Executive Director Katri Kuusikallio:

Ministry of Church (Kirkeministeriet), Office for Recognised Religious Communities: Jens Christian Holm, Chief of Office, Lawyer.

Forum for Religious Freedom (Foreign Ministry on Freedom of Religion and Belief): Mathilde Silje Helø, Director of the Human Rights Department, and Karen Grönlund Rogne, Ambassador for Religion and Belief.

Evangelical-Lutheran Church's Department for Interfaith Cooperation: Secretary General Ane Kristine Brandt, Sigrid la Cour Sonne, and Chair Kirsten Munster.

Danish Muslim Union: Chair Urfan Zahoor Ahmet.

Religion & Samfund Resam: Executive Director Nik Bredholt.

**In Reykjavik,** Chair Heikki Huttunen, Board Member Laura Huovinen, and Executive Director Katri Kuusikallio:

Reykjavik City Human Rights and Democracy Department: Gudrun Elsa Tryggvadottir, Lawyer.

Interfaith Forum of Iceland: Convenor Jacob Rolland. The forum includes 27 member communities, with representatives present from Buddhists, Methodists, Bahá'ís, Theosophists, Pentecostals, Evangelical Lutherans, Roman Catholics, ancient pagan religions, and Moonies.

USKOT - RESA - CORE

