



**PERMANENT DELEGATION
OF NORWAY TO THE OSCE**

**Statement by Norway on the Role of the Military Chaplains in the armed
forces and the freedom of belief (in peacetime or at war)**

As delivered by Tor S. Olberg, Adviser to the Chief Chaplain General on Church and religious matters
to the Forum for Security Co-operation
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Mr. Chairperson, Distinguished panelists, Colleagues.

Freedom to manifest one's religion or faith in practice, worship and observance, either alone or in community with others is among the fundamental human rights. The Norwegian political and military leadership is convinced that its soldiers will perform even better, individually and corporately, when they are granted these rights during their time of service, both during training and combat, as the situation permits.

In consequence, the Norwegian Armed Forces last month appointed its first Muslim and Humanist chaplains to support the soldiers in practicing their rights in this respect. This immediately made headlines in the newspapers and was discussed in radio and television programs. Last week a Member of Parliament on the right of the political specter demanded that the minister of Defense make sure that the Armed Forces' imam be sacked.

The Norwegian Armed Forces Chaplaincy has, since its establishment in 1953, for the most part consisted of chaplains from The Church of Norway, which up until recently was the State Church. Due to the relative small size of the Norwegian Armed Forces, the aim of the political and military leadership, in accord with the Chief Chaplain General, has over the past few years been to prepare for the expansion of the existing, Lutheran, chaplaincy. To include personnel from other registered religious and faith communities, - all in one and the same unit. This I believe is rather unique in Europe. The Chaplaincy has, as already mentioned, recently appointed its first Muslim and Humanist chaplains. This marks the start of a process. There are other denominations to be included, for example the Catholic Church and the Pentecostals.

Our experience is that networking towards the aim of Cooperation is essential to success even though chaplaincies may have divergent views as to why and what it means to cooperate. This offers new perspectives and grounds for further reflection. Our networking comprises other National

Armed Forces and their Chaplaincies, international chaplain conferences, national hospital and prison chaplaincies, representative bodies of national religious and faith communities and various national Ministries.

We are encountering some strong views both within the Chaplaincy Corps, among politicians and social media opposing the process that we are in the middle of. Christians have expressed fear of humanists entering and tearing down the Christian heritage of the Corps. Populist right wingers call for Muslims in general and the newly installed imam in particular to be removed from the service. National media are requesting comments and participation in debates.

On the practical side we have changed the unit's symbol from a Latin cross to what can be interpreted as either a eight pronged star or a compass circle. New branch symbols for the imam and the humanist have been approved and produced. It has been recommended that all positions should in principle be open to any qualified applicant. Christian chaplains, for example, need to be mentally prepared to have a Muslim as their superior senior chaplain. And the Chief Chaplain General might in the future be an atheist.

A necessary condition for service within the Chaplaincy is cooperation of people of good will who recognize that there is more that unites than divides us. The Chaplaincy is not an arena for denominational politics. The service is for the benefit of the individual soldier and the good of the nation that we serve. A basic prerequisite must be that we respect our own and each other's traditions, characteristics and integrity.

It is therefore important to lay down justifiable and sound guidelines for the content and practice of the Chaplaincy service taking into account the bases of faith and practice of the various communities involved in the Chaplaincy. No chaplain can be ordered to perform rituals which violate the faith of his or her community. Once again this presupposes a mutual respect for different views among the chaplains and the wider group of military personnel; and an emphasis on common values in discharging of the service. Dialogue and consultation are of special importance in conducting joint ceremonies as memorial services and parades.

I would like to close with a picture of a circle. A military Chaplaincy, such as the Norwegian one, can be pictured as a majority which in the past has joined hands in a circle. Some elements among the religious majority will now have to step back. And the newer elements need the courage to enter the circle and assume their place in what will become the new circle. A larger, richer and yet still united fellowship of service for our soldiers; - one that in conjunction with other national and international bodies make up the various nations' service for Security and Cooperation in Europe.