

## Ecumenical Easter

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Some years ago, the then Norwegian Prime Minister, Jens Stoltenberg, who is now Secretary General in NATO, said in an interview with a newspaper that he was a bit envious of those who had a personal religious faith. He thought it would be good to believe in something eternal and outside ones everyday chores and worries; something that would always be steadfast, and our side. In that respect, faith can be seen as important for mental health, social and psychological well-being.

Like most people in the West, the PM was a ‘culturally Christian’; he was a member of the church (which was that time a state church); he would attend religious events and celebrations, like most citizens do, such as baptisms, confirmations, weddings and funerals. It was the PM’s duty to attend memorial services after the terrorist tragedies in Norway on 22 July 2011, when 77 people died and more than 200 were injured at the hands of the right-wing extremist Anders Behring Breivik. The PM and the royal family also attended mosque to grieve Muslim victims.

The first funeral after the massacre was for an 18-year old Muslim woman from Iraq, Bano Rashid, who had come to Norway as a refugee, and had later become a citizen and a member of the youth wing of the Labour Party. The funeral service included both Muslim and Christian prayers. Known poems received revivals and were used for comfort and reflection, similar to prayers. When tragedies happen, the role of the church and other religious faith associations is essential. It would be impossible to envisage a time that church bells would not toll on such occasions, even in secular Europe, and today, there would be loudspeaker prayers from the mosques too. These are not only religious manifestations, but are traditions and rituals, with psychological and cultural dimensions.

I also remember when the PM and his family attended the church funeral for the PM’s younger sister, Nini Stoltenberg, who passed away prematurely at the age of 51 after a long struggle with substance abuse. She was a particularly kind person, a trained lawyer working to create awareness and help to those who stumbled and fell on life’s journey, as she had done, too, from time to time.

But then there are also many Norwegians and other Europeans who are more than ‘culturally Christian’. The former PM’s successor as Labour Party Chair, a former minister for foreign affairs and health, and a possible future PM, Jonas Gahr Støhre, is a believer. He sometimes talks about it without making it a centerpiece of his public and political life, which some would probably not like. In Norway today, unlike in America and Pakistan, religion is very much private and personal. It is something that most of us we would only talk about in bits and pieces even with our closest friends and family. Broader, serious conversation about faith and religion would not be common, even for the active church-goers.

I write about this today, because we are in the midst of the Easter holiday in the Christian calendar. Easter is as important as Christmas. It is marked in memory of Jesus’ crucifixion and rising from the dead, so that he could live forever.

The modern interpretation of this dogma is not to demand it to be understood literally. It rather means that *Jesus’ message lives forever* – all those teachings about faith, fairness, kindness and more that the Bible’s New Testament teaches us, complementing or replacing many of the more categorical teachings of the Old Testament. The New Testament is the new covenant between God and human beings, and between all human beings. Needless to say to a Pakistani reader, the Quran celebrates Jesus as

a prophet and his teachings are basic to all Muslims, including to Prophet Mohammad (PBUH), God's last messenger.

Although Easter is not a feast in Islam, Jesus' ascension to heaven, forty days later, is also part of the Muslim religious tradition, although in different words: 'Allah raised him unto Himself'. Again, our understanding should be that his message, God's message, lives forever.

When I above exemplified religious belief in my home country Norway by talking about some of the political leaders' belief, or lack thereof, and a tragic event in the country, I did that to draw attention to the role of religion in society. And politicians' lives have become everybody's concern! At times of tragedies, and in the major events in our lives, there is little difference between confessed believers and those who don't see themselves as believers. We should not judge each other or label each other for being on the right or wrong side, or for belonging to one or the other religion or tradition.

In countries and communities where there is more than one religion, it is important that we always keep an open heart towards believers of other religions. In Europe, including in Norway, there are now several religions living side by side, and there are some who 'don't find time' to think much about faith issues. There are about one hundred and fifty thousand Muslims, and about forty thousand of them hail from Pakistan. It is important for the majority community to accommodate newcomers, and it is important that the newcomers, either they are Christians, Muslims, or belong to another religion, try to understand religiosity in the host country's tradition.

Rather than being critical to religious manifestations, as they appear in the public room, we should try to consider the undercurrents and allow people's discrete and private expressions.

In Norway, there is more focus on Easter as a time for a skiing holiday than a religious feast. At least that is the focus in the media, shopping malls and hotel advertisements; the young and successful must go skiing in the mountains at Easter. Traditionally, before it became a religious feast, Easter was a spring festival, as it also is in the Persian tradition, where the New Year, *Norooz*, is celebrated on 20 or 21 March, Spring Equinox.

And then, isn't it interesting how the exact time of Easter is fixed? Easter Sunday falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon after Spring Equinox. It is not only Islam that uses the moon to decide religious events! Tomorrow is Good Friday and three days later, 5 April, it is Easter Sunday.

Dear readers, may I wish you a *Happy Easter* – Christians and all other believers, and those who wish they had a faith or search for it. Remember, too, that faith is a gift, it is not an achievement. And what faith we belong to, is not a function of our own efforts; it is mostly decided by where we were born, what family we grew up in, and other cultural and social factors.

Easter's message is deeply religious, and it has secular aspects. It is a message that belongs to many religions and traditions. It is a message about change, faith and human relations. It is a message about believing in a force greater than that of humans, in this life and in eternity. Let us join hands in a broad, open and ecumenical Easter, as we should always look for communalities and what unites rather than what divides.

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