Book Review

Ingvill Thorson Plesner
Religionspolitikk [Politics of religion]

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Ingvill Thorson Plesner of the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights at the University of Oslo has written a fine book on religion and politics in Norway, which is timely, substantial and a pleasure to read for people both inside and outside the field. This Norwegian language book sets out to describe, analyse and discuss the politics of religion and worldviews that Norway currently has and should have in the future, and how the Norwegian state should act in order to be as conducive as possible to this. Norwegian politicians have sought to bring about a coherent policy, and Thorson Plesner rises to the challenge to qualify, both legally and interdisciplinarily, the issues that a thoroughly thought out, coherent, principally sound and well-balanced policy must address.

The significance of this book is that it resonates so well with the context of ongoing discussions and recent changes in Norway. While the book is presumably addressed to a wider Norwegian audience and perhaps not to experts in matters of law, religion and politics, it remains relevant to people with a general familiarity in these areas, such a high school graduates, university students, professionals in the Church of Norway, or other religious communities.

The value of this book goes beyond a Norwegian readership. The book takes time to discuss Norway in the light of European models of religion and politics (Chapter 3), to discuss the international Human Rights framework of rights and protections (Chapter 4) and to discuss relevant cases from European Court of Human Rights (Chapter 5). As such, it is fairly easy to relate to for fellow Scandinavians who have an interest in Norwegian affairs and who do not shy away from clear, straightforward written Norwegian.
Thorson Plesner’s home advantage as a human rights researcher shines through in the book. In many ways human rights law, more than any other fields, grapples with the issue of the conflict of rights and liberties, which Thorson Plesner rightly identifies as the key to a coherent policy on religion and worldviews. Thorson Plesner elegantly connects the legal perspectives to associated and similar dilemmas or conflicts as these are expressed in other academic fields, such as philosophy (p. 119), political science (p. 130) and theology (p. 141), and unfolds interdisciplinary analytical benefits of such a strategy. It remains an absolute forte of the book that it branches out of the field of human rights, lending a trained legal eye to the careful balancing and assessment of conflicting rights and the prerogatives of the state, which, in practical terms, should intervene and regulate.

However, because of the strength of the legal thinking and the nuanced view of the complex conflicts of rights and liberties of religion and politics, a weakness in the book is that it has a tendency to oversimplify other, related matters. While other academic approaches or disciplines will recognise themselves in Thorson Plesner’s narrative and expositions, their internal and disciplinary complexities are glossed over quickly. This is legitimate, of course, as any author must make choices and will naturally play to their advantages and academic interests. Nonetheless, from at least one perspective, this is somewhat problematic. I wonder how a minister in the Church of Norway will see the conflicts and dilemmas from an internal ecclesiastical context. While the current disestablishment or deregulation of the Church of Norway into an independent legal entity is indeed a question for the Norwegian Parliament, many of the discussions in the book call for much deeper religious studies or theological discussions. From time to time, the reader gets a reference to a bishop or a priest as part of a commission, but what does the Church of Norway say about these changes? After all, it is the – now legally independent – institution most greatly affected.

What the book does give the reader, which is of great relevance and use, are critical and operational analytical tools for navigating and discussing the ongoing political debates. Thorson Plesner applies a number of important distinctions that have direct relevance for understanding the political negotiations and debates on religion and worldviews. It is of significant value to understand the basis of legislation as either drawn from a view of the state as built on _demos_, the wide democratic collective, or on _etnos_, the populace that shares values and traditions. Likewise, to distinguish between concerns for freedom versus the demands for equality in balancing rights; or to appreciate the imperative of both majority and minority collectives as constituent bases for protections and rights, while not losing sight of the protection for individuals, dissidents or minorities amongst minorities.

Looking to the Norwegian situation from a Scandinavian, Nordic or even Baltic point of view, there are some very interesting things going on in Norway, and there have been at least since the beginning of the 21st century. Many of the challenges faced by Norway – extremism, growing religious pluralism, and dwindling membership of the majority church – are shared across the Nordic and Baltic countries. The Norwegian answer to this is fascinating. From the point of view of Thorson Plesner, the Norwegian model is coherent, open and human rights-based secularism, built on educated insights into ethical dilemmas, rights conflicts and contemporary challenges, one that is not neutral on values and traditions, but respectfully appreciative of these. As such, the Norwegian model is rare amongst the Euro-
pean models of religion and politics, and with recent changes it seems that its foundations are solid. How well it will stand against right wing populism, globalization and changing demographics will be highly interesting to follow.

Thorson Plesner’s *Religionspolitikk* is recommended to students and curious others who want to explore the Norwegian case as such or comparatively. It is a well-written, interdisciplinary introduction to and discussion of the contemporary Norwegian politics of religion and worldview that is both timely and highly relevant.