

Humanism becoming the mainstream

Since its founding in 1956, Human-Etisk Forbund (HEF, The Norwegian Humanist Association) has grown to over 100,000 members (a substantial number, considering that Norway has just over 5 million inhabitants), making it both the largest humanist organisation in the world and the largest faith or lifestance group in Norway after the Church of Norway.



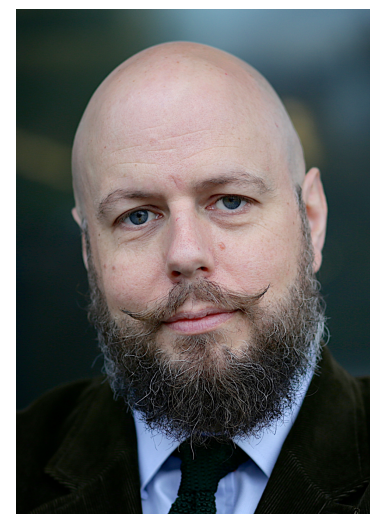
There are several reasons for this success. One is that the Norwegian state has a policy of funding the Church of Norway, and compensates other faith and lifestance groups accordingly. This has given HEF a generous and secure economic framework. It would be misleading to credit financial stability alone. Another reason for HEF's success is that humanism is in line with how the average Norwegian thinks. A majority of Norwegians report that they do not believe in god. Many Norwegians have little interest in religion, a Norwegian cliché being 'nature is my church'. Thus, the average Norwegian humanist is in many ways an average Norwegian.

Another reason for humanism's mainstream acceptance is that HEF delivers ceremonies that are remarkably popular. Confirmations are a big deal in Norway, and while a majority of young people still choose to be confirmed in the Church of Norway, humanist confirmations are chosen by almost 20% of Norwegian 14-year-olds. The number is growing. Humanist weddings and funerals are also gaining popularity.

Another field that HEF is venturing into is that of humanist chaplaincy. The organisation recently got the first humanist chaplain into the Norwegian Army, and more are set to come in the next few years. Work is also beginning to place chaplains in hospitals and universities, and within the penal system.

Part of HEF's way of being a humanist organisation is to not only keep a watchful eye on religious organisations and practices, but also to tackle subjects such as extremism, populism, conspiracy thinking, and the demonisation of minorities. One result of this was that during the trial against the far-right mass-murderer Anders Behring Breivik, a key moment in modern Norwegian history, a number of expert witnesses had links to HEF.

Humanism is now firmly entrenched in the cultural mainstream of Norway. A potential danger for HEF as a membership organisation is that humanism actually becomes the mainstream to such an extent that Norwegians don't see any need to join HEF. However, so far that does not seem to have happened, as HEF continues to receive a steady stream of new members.



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Photo credit: Arnfinn Pettersen