**Religion and the state**

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Congratulations on yesterday’s Pakistan Day, 23 March 2023, also named Pakistan Resolution Day and Republic Day, commemorating the adoption of the first Constitution of Pakistan when the country became the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in 1956. This year, the first day of Ramadan and Pakistan Day were on the same date. Also, the Christian fast, often called Lent, is now about halfway through and it will end on Easter Sunday, 9 April. (The exact time of Easter Sunday varies a bit from year to year as it falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon after Spring Equinox.)

Pakistan was the world’s first Islamic republic to be founded, deriving from the Muslim-majority provinces in the North-West and the East, now Bangladesh, of former British India. The Pakistan Armed Forces also hold a parade on the day. Pakistan Day is indeed a proud day for the country, in addition to Independence Day 14 August. Islam is defining the foundation of the state although not everyone considered it right to include religion in the name and as a definition of the country since there are also other religious groups, with Christians being the largest, symbolised with a white section in the green flag.

[PM calls coalition partners' parliamentary party meeting on Wednesday](https://www.nation.com.pk/04-Apr-2023/pm-calls-coalition-partners-parliamentary-party-meeting-on-wednesday)

Let me underline that religion is part of the identity of many countries, even those that today see themselves as secular and a clear divide between the state and the church, and other religions, too. Historically, the UK and most other Western countries have considered religion a formal part of the foundation of the state. In the UK, to this day, the head of state must belong to the Anglican denomination of Christianity. In my home country Norway, the head of state must belong to the Evangelical Lutheran denomination of the Protestant Church. The Norwegians revised the country’s constitution a few years ago, but kept the paragraph about the head of state, King Harald V, having to belong to the majority branch of the main religion in the country, which until 2012 was the country’s state religion, with the head of state also being the head of the church. It should be underlined that there is today religious freedom in the country and equal rights for all, irrespective of what faith one belongs to, or none. With major immigration from Muslim countries, indeed from Pakistan, Muslims form a sizable religious minority.

[Imran seeks explanation from PDM for delay in Punjab Assembly polls](https://www.nation.com.pk/04-Apr-2023/imran-seeks-explanation-from-pdm-for-delay-in-punjab-assembly-polls)

It is interesting to know that in the UK, King Charles III said some years ago that instead of becoming ‘head of the Anglican faith’, he would rather have liked to be ‘head of faith’, considering the diverse backgrounds and faiths of the country’s citizens with origins from the whole Commonwealth and beyond.

Yet, in spite of all this, in the UK and Norway, countries still consider Christianity their most important religion, even giving a special place to the Anglican and Lutheran denominations, respectively. At the same time, the countries are secular, as mentioned, with people often being ‘culturally Christian’ rather than active believers. There is openness and tolerance to other religions, but it may still take some time for all to be accepted equally and without any shred of prejudice. But let us note that the new Prime Minister in the UK, Rishi Sunak, is a Hindu, with Indian and East-African family background.

In other Western countries, such as France and USA, religion is not defined in the same ways as in the UK and Norway, and most other Western countries, yet still Christianity does have a special place. Both France and USA formed their constitutions on the spirit and values of the time, with the American Declaration of Independence in 1779, and The French Revolution from 1789-1790, stressing the principles of ‘liberty, equality, and fraternity’. In France, the Catholic Church has remained strong in spite of it being separate from the state. In the USA, the Protestant Church and its numerous denominations have played a role informally in a country where religion is more visible than in Europe. When John F. Kennedy became president in 1961, he was the first Catholic to become president, and some voters considered it an issue that he was not a Protestant. It should also be recalled that when the USA was created, many immigrants fled religious persecution in Europe because independent groups outside the official state church were not accepted. When the first Norwegians travelled to America in 1825, many did so because they were seeking religious freedom there. It was not until the 1840s that religious groups outside the state church in Norway were allowed to congregate without the permission of the local parish priest, and he was actually a civil servant, representing the church and the state.

[Nawaz Sharif wants SC justices be charged for their 'unfathomable' verdict](https://www.nation.com.pk/04-Apr-2023/nawaz-sharif-wants-sc-justices-be-charged-for-their-unfathomable-verdict)

In France and USA, government schools are not allowed to be confessional and preach religion, not even related to Christmas and other Christian holidays. However, in most countries in Europe, the Christian religion and Bible studies have remained basic elements of education and the school system till our time, but now the emphasis is shifting to broader religious studies, values and moral aspects. But the school calendar follows the church calendar with holidays related to Christmas, Easter, and so on. In the future, it is possible that other religions’ holidays may also be included in the state’s official holiday calendar, but it is likely to take time and include debate before it can happen. Instead, it might be possible to have a Day of Prayer, or a Thanksgiving Day, where all religions could be included. Also, in countries that are becoming multi-religious and multi-cultural, such as Norway with a growing number of Muslims, a House of Prayer for all religions could be established, in addition to churches, mosques and other houses of worship.

[Masses will give befitting reply to govt for attacking CJP: Parvez Elahi](https://www.nation.com.pk/04-Apr-2023/masses-will-give-befitting-reply-to-govt-for-attacking-cjp-parvez-elahi)

In a recent article about an ongoing conflict between indigenous Norwegians and the majority society, I drew attention to the world becoming more international, global and multi-cultural, and at the same time, we become more ethnic and local. That would also have religious aspects; we would develop openness and respect for other religions at the same time as we stayed in our own religion and traditions.

I believe that in the future, European countries, which are becoming more multi-religious and multi-cultural, should be grateful for the new situation as it also enriches Christianity and the countries’ majority cultures. Most people realize this, but we should talk more about it and be more welcoming to change, and again, also cherish our own traditions and cultures, and the new ones. For some time, religion, mainly Christianity, has played a lesser role in a more secular Europe. I believe that is changing, and that old and new groups of faithful will become more important, in a way where we all become more open-minded and international, being proud of our own background and faith, and appreciating others. Let us reflect on this as we celebrate Ramadan and Lent.