

Norway Retreats Back Into the Middle Ages

Written by James Randi

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Norwegian reader Bjarte Foshaug gives us disheartening news. I had always thought of the Scandinavian countries as being generally more rational than most other parts of the world, but I must reconsider that view after learning this. Mr. Foshaug writes:

Words can not describe how much I appreciate what you are doing. Sorry if this has already been brought to your attention, but things don't look too good in Norway at the moment. I have often seen my own country hailed as a beacon of enlightenment. All I can now say is that if the situation is even worse everywhere else, we are all doomed...

I am genuinely alarmed by how standards have fallen in our society. Lately there has been a great deal of hype around a local healer named Joralf Gjerstad - usually referred to as the "Snåsa Man," after his home village. Of course the media has given him all the free publicity he could dream of, usually without a hint of skepticism. So far there have been lots of anecdotes, but no real evidence, as Gjerstad himself has refused to be tested. The latest twist in this farce is that several politicians - including the Minister of Health - have joined the media circus and declared their faith in Gjerstad's abilities. Another politician, who also happens to be a physician, has spoken out in favor of the healing powers of prayers and magic verses. How reassuring to know that the major decisions regarding our health are left in the charge of people who know how to rationally evaluate data...

Perhaps even more worrying is the recent decision to criminalize criticism of religion as a hate crime. The old law prohibiting the victimless crime of "blasphemy" had not been put into practice for decades and was about to be abolished, but the majority of our three-party government caved in to pressure from the minority and decided instead to expand the law against "hate speech" to include insults to religion. So instead of having no law against blasphemy, we have now got one that is much more likely to actually be used. The Norwegian poet and fearless atheist Arnulf Øverland once said that whoever tries to honestly describe Christianity the way it is, can hardly avoid making himself guilty of blasphemy. I can only conclude that speaking the truth about religion is now officially a crime in our society. Fortunately, there have been some strong reactions against the decision from the majority in our parliament, so the last word may not have been said quite yet.

I hope that Bjarte will keep us informed on these two items, and we'll pass on any developments to SWIFT readers...