

21 Theses on Spiritual Freedom



Introduction

Spiritual freedom is a crucial concept in the Danish understanding of democracy and community and has been a visible compass in Danish society for the last two centuries.

The concept is central to one of Denmark's most important laws, the Primary Education Act, which carries the following wording in subsection 3 of its preamble: The aim of primary education is to prepare pupils for participation in, and joint responsibility for, the rights and duties of a society based on freedom and democracy. The activities of a school must therefore be characterised by spiritual freedom, equal status, and democracy.

“Spiritual freedom” is cognate with the UN Declaration on Human Rights of 1948, in particular articles 18, 19, 20 and 26, which formulate the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, freedom of belief and expression, freedom of information and education, and freedom of assembly. Corresponding freedom rights are contained in the Danish Constitution (§§ 67-68, 70 and 76-79). The guiding principle may be formulated as: Freedom to diversity, provided one does no harm to others.

Spiritual freedom is not just a safeguard of individual freedom, however. It is also a necessity, if our differing views are not just

to be tolerated, but are to be fruitful in constructing our life together in society.

In *21 Theses on Spiritual Freedom* we apply the following definition:

Spiritual freedom in a society means that individuals and groups have the freedom to hold their convictions in religious, ideological, and ethical matters, to express this conviction, to mediate it, and act in accordance with it. Spiritual freedom is limited by the right of fellow citizens to the same freedom, and involves a duty to stand up for the other's right.

The reason that we are presenting these theses now is that in our view spiritual freedom is under pressure. We wish to point out that spiritual freedom is essential, if democracy is not to degenerate into the 'dictatorship of the majority'.

In autumn 2010 the Christian Educational Institute took the initiative to bring together a number of people in Danish church life to discuss spiritual freedom, its nature and necessity. Their work culminated in *21 Theses on Spiritual Freedom*, which were drawn up in November 2011.

The theses are followed by the section *Spiritual Freedom in Denmark*, which provides a brief historical and current background for the 21 theses.

The *21 Theses on Spiritual Freedom* are addressed to Danes of every religious, political and ideological persuasion. We are convinced that spiritual freedom is crucial to our ability to live together decently, however widely our beliefs differ. We are also addressing Danish politicians, opinion-makers, and the media, since we believe that they have a particular responsibility for promoting and practising spiritual free-

dom – for the benefit of Denmark and the international society.

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21 Theses on Spiritual Freedom



The Argument for Spiritual Freedom

Thesis 1

All people must be able freely to hold religious, ideological, or ethical convictions. True conviction can only be acquired in freedom.

Thesis 2

Freedom to choose and to be bound by a conviction advances the identity of the individual and the diversity of society.

Thesis 3

Spiritual freedom strengthens and develops society, as various and conflicting convictions can meet and clash in mutual respect.

Thesis 4

Spiritual freedom is a safeguard against regimentation in society and the subversion of social order through violent means.

The Nature of Spiritual Freedom

Thesis 5

Spiritual freedom is most clearly visible when one allows a person or a group with whom one deeply disagrees the freedom to believe, think, express, and work according to their own conviction.

Thesis 6

The guiding principle of spiritual freedoms is "the mouth is free, the hand is bound". This means that all citizens and groups of citizens have the right – within the law and with responsibility and accountability to the courts – to advocate every imaginable view in print, in writing, and in speech.

Thesis 7

Freedom of expression is an indispensable element in spiritual freedom, and includes an open-hearted and respectful debate characterised by both robustness and considerateness.

Spiritual freedom in society

Thesis 8

Public authorities must go to great lengths to enable minorities to develop in accordance with their convictions.

Thesis 9

Out of regard for spiritual freedom public authorities must limit to the best of their ability their intervention, control, and surveillance of citizens' individual and shared lives.

Thesis 10

The government services must be neutral in relation to the citizens' convictions.

Thesis 11

Minorities must accept that a country's history, culture, and traditions express themselves in the collective life of society.

Thesis 12

Religious and ideological organisations or institutions must have the freedom on an impartial basis to make demands on the attitudes and ethics of employed staff.

Thesis 13

For as long as the Danish Lutheran Church enjoys a favoured position in the Danish Constitution, legislation and Danish society in general must also ensure as much freedom and state service for other religious communities and organisations.

Spiritual freedom and democracy

Thesis 14

Democracy is the best form of governance that has been established to date. It creates a framework for making necessary decisions that are representative of the will of the people.

Thesis 15

Spiritual freedom, the protection of minorities, and respect for the agreed rules are important preconditions for democracy to be the best framework in which to manage disagreements between citizens or groups of citizens.

Thesis 16

In a democracy it is permissible to argue for its abolition, but not to resort to violence, force, power, and weapons to overthrow it.

Spiritual freedom and education

Thesis 17

The concept of spiritual freedom is a meaningful part of the preamble to the Primary Education Act and should be given actual content in the teaching, education, and activity between teachers, pupils and parents.



Thesis 18

Spiritual freedom includes the right of parents (or guardians) to choose an alternative to state education for their children. In Danish society this right can only be realised when the state makes such a large grant to these independent schools that parents are not subjected to greater financial expenses for their child's education than they can bear.

Thesis 19

Spiritual freedom should include the right of independent educational institutions at senior level and beyond, to have the right on the basis of objective criteria to hold nationally recognised examinations and for their students to receive the same student grants as in the public sector.

Spiritual Freedom in an International Perspective

Thesis 20

Spiritual freedom is a common good. Although societies and their constitutions may be constructed differently, spiritual freedom should extend to all citizens, including freedom of religion, the right freely to change one's religion, and the right to criticise religion.

Thesis 21

It is the responsibility of citizens and of the legitimate national and international authorities to support and safeguard spiritual freedom in each and every nation.

Spiritual freedom in Denmark

The Historical Tradition

Since the establishment of the Constitution in 1849 Danish democracy has been closely linked to spiritual freedom. There has been broad agreement that no one can deny another the right to express an opinion on what is true and right in civil society and in the life of the individual, not only in order to protect the minority but also to keep the possibility open for renewal and inspiration by seeing how other life-views than that of the majority can be lived out in reality.

We might say more simply that a main thread of the Danish democratic tradition is 'minority democracy'. The truth as regards an understanding of the relation between human life and social life cannot be achieved by a ballot. The minority, indeed even the individual, may be just as right as the majority.

Democracy is a framework for the common causes of society. This means that when a solution cannot be reached by negotiation, a majority decides the outcome, in the belief that no better method exists for making decisions on joint concerns. But by acknowledging that the minority, or even the individual, may be just as right in their understanding, the majority must allow the minority room to express their views and live them out.

With this understanding of democracy in mind, Denmark passed laws on the school, the church, and society which post-1849 allowed widespread rights for the minority, and, of equal importance, gave minorities the opportunity not just in principle but also economically in practice to do what they considered right and proper.

Historically, the source, condition, and

challenge of spiritual freedom has been the liberation of the individual or the group. With its source in a Christian or humanist understanding of the dignity of the individual, from the 18th century onwards the enlightenment philosophers and others (e.g. N.F.S. Grundtvig) worked to liberate the individual.

Through enlightenment and mutual respect people must be set free of oppression, be it physical, religious, economic, or ideological. Revolutions, power transformations, and democratic settlements as well as comprehensive education programmes (e.g. new school systems) have followed in the wake of these freedom enterprises.

If this ongoing demand for greater freedom for the individual and the many groups with conflicting interests is to be constructive, it must be borne by a common understanding of spiritual freedom, with the freedom of the individual linked to respect for the freedom of others.

Spiritual freedom will therefore always be in dispute, since there is always a tension between what the individual or the group wants and a respect for what others want. In addition, there are always actual circumstances which put pressure on spiritual freedom.

Current Challenges

Today spiritual freedom is challenged by the spread of indifference to the value of this principle. This happens unintentionally, for instance, when local councils, wishing to harmonise care facilities for children or the aged, terminate agreements with private, value-based agents. And it becomes intentional when citizens, including politicians, compromise on spiritual freedom out of fear of those who are different. There is no

longer a general understanding that Danish democracy must be '*minority democracy*', and that democracy does not necessarily mean that the majority is right.

There is also a tendency in Denmark today for people to demarcate themselves in relation to others, whom they then exclude from a number of areas of social life. The view is widespread that the way in which we (a demarcated group) act and organise is the only right and proper way. Such self-centredness limits our understanding of the reasonableness – and thus the willingness – to consider the minority.

Since the terror attacks on the USA in 2001 a new and crucial factor for spiritual freedom has impacted on society, namely the fear of terror. This fear often serves to legitimise restrictions on the human right to self-expression.

Even though in a number of countries spiritual freedom has far less favourable conditions than in Denmark, this question deserves our renewed attention, since the sum total of a number of individual cases shows a move towards the curtailing of spiritual freedom. This tendency is found in the following examples:

Freedom of religion

As a result of the presence of Islam and of Muslims in Denmark a number of political pronouncements have been issued in recent years demanding limitations and control that would break with the principle of freedom of religion – and thereby spiritual freedom – if they were to be implemented:

- A ban on the headscarf and burka in public.
- A ban on shower curtains and fasting in the primary school.

- A ban on satellite dishes in 'ethnic enclaves'.

From the point of view of spiritual freedom, the fact that these calls have been unable to gather political support is gratifying, but they nevertheless demonstrate that a number of politicians and voters weigh other considerations higher than that of freedom of religion and thereby spiritual freedom.

When in spring 2011 the Ministry of Integration published a report on the views mediated by private Koran Schools (corresponding to Christian Sunday Schools), spiritual freedom was also put under pressure.

On the other hand, there are also examples of Muslims themselves pressurising spiritual freedom, for example:

- the superimposing of graffiti 'muzzles' on election posters of prospective Muslim MPs.
- the rejection of criticism and satire of Islam.
- the wish to introduce sharia law on a housing estate.

A number of Muslim countries also oppose freedom of religion by, for instance, forbidding criticism of Islam and by the discrimination, imprisonment, and execution of converts to other religions. The fact that the same may be said of certain Hindu, Communist, and Christian societies does not lessen the problem. Nor does the fact that certain Muslims and certain Muslim countries oppose spiritual freedom justify any limitation on Muslim religious freedom in western democracies.

Freedom in schools

There are also examples of the tradition for freedom in Danish schools coming under pressure – and thereby spiritual freedom. This is revealed by the introduction in 2010

of a school inspection on freedom and democracy – the so-called ‘extremism inspection’ – in independent primary schools. Five schools each year are being checked over a 5-year period to see whether their teaching is serving to propagate extremist views.

Undoubtedly such an inspection, which is above and beyond the ordinary inspection – which itself has been sharpened – must be seen in the light of the fear of extremism in Muslim independent schools, and is a further example of how fear of terror and extremism limits spiritual freedom. The inspection covers all independent schools, giving rise to the fear that it will contribute to a general limitation on spiritual freedom in this educational sector.

The freedom of these schools is also closely linked to the question of *financial grants*. The state covers c. 70% of the independent schools’ expenditure. The question is: To what extent can these substantial grants be cut before the choice of alternative education is limited to a freedom of choice for only the well-off parents?

Legislation for the independent schools shows a fundamental consideration for minorities, provided the schools are run on educationally sound principles. This allows parents a genuine choice of alternative education to the state schools.

In itself it is not an attack on spiritual freedom to reduce financial grants to the independent schools. It is also understandable that parents who choose alternative education must pay a certain fee for their choice. The point is that if their economic pain threshold is exceeded, a grant reduction does indeed affect the parents’ free choice of school – and is thus an incursion on spiritual freedom.

Freedom for atheists

Similarly, it is important that society ensures the freedom of atheists to express, argue and practise their views. However, it is impossible to create a social space that is *free* of religion, for the history, culture, and traditions of a people are bound up with their religion. Atheism is no more a neutral position than theism.

In those areas where religious believers and atheists are together, where various views form a natural part of the day-to-day rhythm, for example in schools, mutual respect ensures that these views can co-exist without anyone being pressurised into taking part in religious or ideological ceremonies that conflict with their convictions. Avoidance of such conflict can be achieved by allowing pupils to be exempt from, for instance, saying prayers at morning assembly.

On the one hand many will regard this as an attack on Danish tradition, Danish history, and Danish Christianity, just as there will be those who complain that a Viking crucifix has been reproduced in the Danish passport. On the other hand we must also be on guard not to pressurize minorities into using Christian symbols in their private sphere. In such are as the concept of spiritual freedom requires the greatest possible mutual respect, in the knowledge that there are no easy solutions to be found to such questions.

