

# WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY INTERVIEWS

***As long as the State Church discriminates you have State sanctioned discrimination. We also have to give money to other churches and religious communities, which are even worse in that regard. These religious congregations are homophobic and racist because our State Church is so as well.***

## **An Interview with Dag Ø. Endsjø**

Tuesday, November 3, 2009  
Dag's home in Oslo, Norway

**Dag Ø. Endsjø:** My name is Dag Øistein Endsjø, I am a professor of Religious Studies at the University of Bergen and the leader of *Menneskerettsalliansen*, the *Norwegian Human Rights Alliance* in Oslo, an independent alliance of twelve human rights organizations working against discrimination based on grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, gender, ethnicity, etc.

In Norway, as in many other countries, we have various levels in the legal system. There is more protection for people who are discriminated on the ground of gender than for those discriminated on the ground of ethnicity, or more protection on the ground of disability than on the ground of sexual orientation for example. From our perspective, discrimination, regardless of its ground is an issue of human rights. You cannot say that one kind of discrimination is more serious than another. The alliance is working to advance all human rights equally.

When I first got involved with the gay and lesbian movement we were fighting small battles. Politicians at the time thought of themselves as liberal but they were willing to do only small things for us. When I started to write in newspapers and to get involved in politics, I said no, this is not good; we will stay like this forever, thinking that politicians are nice to us but they are not giving us our rights. We are not going to settle any more for little things. We are not going to keep on having a small battle after a small battle: we are going to war. We are going to say we don't want these nibbles; we want everything. We want marriage; we want equal rights despite of our sexual orientation. After civil unions were very narrowly accepted by the parliament in 1993 there was no subsequent mention of marriage; and even the leader of the gay and lesbian movement criticized me for speaking about marriage equality. But we also wanted marriage.

I must say that this hasn't been easy because there has been a split amongst gay and lesbians about this issue. I have always thought: if you say you don't want to be like a heterosexual that is up to you. If you don't want to be like heterosexuals, you could have a hysterical marriage, you could make it into a parody, don't marry, or do whatever you want. The thing is that we can't use that as a rule to deny anyone's equal rights. We don't want different rights, we don't want separate but equal. These are some of the motivations to initiate the *Norwegian Human Rights Alliance* in 2004.

**Carlos Motta:** I understand that your main form of activism has been writing?

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**DØE:** Mostly. But I have been part of organizations as well as I mentioned before. Regardless of the form, I am interested in arguing about these issues. In fact, I have been very much inspired by the American point of view, especially by the existence of the human rights council and their equality symbol. With their help I realized that *ours* is a matter of human rights, not of special rights, but of human rights. Human rights are kept away from *us* in the same way that they are kept away from many other people. I have tried to bring this way of thinking to Norway. Nowadays politicians talk about human rights, which is very good. Their argument before was about rights for those *poor little* gays who need to be helped because they are so depressed and have miserable lives...

**CM:** There still seems to be a critical attitude coming from academics that are interested in queer theory regarding issues of “respectability” and family values. How do you reconcile your interest in this, using the issue of marriage as a kind of political strategy?

**DØE:** I have to show you a book. It was one of the first things I did. I wrote it together with some other people in 2001. It is titled “Sick of Gender/Sex.” Personally, I don't care at all about people's sex and gender and my gender status and gender identity are very much personal and aesthetic things. But even if you don't think like a queer person you have to respect other people's identities. You can't force people to live the way you want them to. But without a framework of rights you can't do that. Whatever rights are there for straight people should be also available for gay and lesbians. Similarly for example, I support the adoption of children by gay couples although I don't want children myself.

**CM:** Your attitude reflects a kind of an instrumentalization of identity politics for achieving legislation and political change. This is similar to the attitudes of the Norwegian gay and lesbian movement from the 1970s onwards. How do you pick up that legacy and how do you reconcile those similarities and differences in approach and methodology?

**DØE:** I stand on the shoulder of the giants. I have to accept that. They have operated in a very important way, step by step. We have to remember that male homosexuality wasn't decriminalized until 1972. Then came the partnership law; without these civil unions we wouldn't have been able to have marriage. But after 1993 we watched the movement floundering, they were running from small case to small case, they couldn't find a focus anymore. That was the challenge but people said, “Oh we are fine,” but I said you are not fine. You are just used to being second-class citizens. And you shouldn't be used to that. You shouldn't allow people to treat you like that. So that is what I tried to get into the gay movement.

Interestingly, the one that pushed the issue of marriage was not the gay and lesbian organization itself. It was the gay and lesbian politicians and their allies in the various parties: in the *Socialist Left Party* fore mostly, in the *Labor Party*, in the *Conservative Party* and in the *Liberal Party*. It is very interesting that the gay and lesbian organization never managed really to get on to this. It has obviously been doing very well, they are very good at organizing at a local level and they have been pushing very important projects such as the *Activity Plans for Gay, Lesbians and Transgender People*. But when it comes to the political issue, to human rights, to marriage and to equal rights, they have been good in following up, but the initiative hasn't been coming from them. I think what has really changed here are two things: the thinking that gay rights are not special rights but human rights, which is now something more or less accepted by everybody except for the *Progress Party*. And that the gay and lesbian politicians in various par

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ties have been very 'out' and precise in their political arguments.

**CM:** What do you think are the effects of this progressive legislation on the way that people are actually living their lives out on the street? Has there been a change in the culture that has followed the law? If yes, how?

**DØE:** Yes. The biggest change happened in 1993 after the partnership law. That normalized the situation. And you have to recall that no matter how many of us who feel and look queer, who don't want to live in monogamous relationships and who have very radical lives; we are a minority among gay and lesbian people. Gay and lesbians are very much like straight people. They want to have ordinary lives in the suburbs. That is what happened with the civil unions, it was so much easier to normalize lives that it became a flood. When I grew up there was one 'out' famous lesbian activist, Kim Friele, and there were some rumors about some other people, but hardly anyone was out. Nowadays people 'come out' all the time and no one cares, it's no news anymore. People are just accepting us as a normal variety, it's just like, "Oh he's gay, she's gay, oh well, O.K."

**CM:** It is my impression, and I have no way of statistically proving this, but from conversations with people on the streets, in gay bars, online at gaysir.no, etc., that being out is an issue, that the idea of coming out is still a concern for many people. This surprised me because I imagined that the behavior following the progressive legislation in this country would be to have an entirely open life. And it doesn't seem to be the case. Some of your colleagues have also recognized that there is still a level of concealment. What do you think this is about?

**DØE:** Yes there is concealment. There are still very conservative segments of the population. If you are growing up in a conservative Muslim or Christian community for example, often you carry condemnations and it is not *fun* to come out. Some people also have expectations of themselves being straight and when they find out they are not, they don't like it... Others are still worried about what other people think. Kids are still beaten up because of being gay. But this is changing; now people come out in junior high school! That was never the case when I was young. We just kept quiet; I knew that was the only feasible way...

**CM:** I would like to speak about the issue of citizenship as it relates to the influence of the Church on human rights. The issue of discrimination is one that is left in parenthesis when it comes to the Church. I don't know if you can say that the Church technically has the right to discriminate, but they do. Can you speak about the relationship between sex and religion in Norway?

**DØE:** The problem with Norway is that we have a State Church. I think 82% of Norwegians are members of the Church. Even though the government sector should regulate what we should believe in, in practice the Church still has regulation autonomy and they are still allowed to discriminate against gays, lesbians and (straight) women, to a certain degree. The State Church is a problem because you cannot regulate what the other various religions believe in. The Catholic Church, for example, can't hire heterosexually active male priests or women priests at all because it is against their dogma. As long as the State Church discriminates you have State sanctioned discrimination. You also have to give money to other churches and religious communities, which are even worse in that regard. These religious congregations are homophobic, racist, or

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whatever else because our State Church is so as well.

**CM:** I imagine this propagates a kind of religious ethic to all other aspects of society in relationship to this subject?

**DØE:** Yes, in two ways. There are, of course traditional Christian anti-sexual arguments, which now are mostly focused on gays and lesbians. Whatever straight people do, or don't do, is more or less forgotten, and the whole focus is now on these little minorities of gays and lesbians. This is a *great* thing for the Christians because everyone can feel so good when they harass the gays and lesbians. It is obviously great to hate and to go after minorities; this always makes you feel better. There is also a general sense of homophobia in parts of the population that is connected historically to a religious tradition, but which is not religiously based now.

**CM:** What is the modern history of the relation between sex and religion in this country from the 1950s onwards? Has the attitude changed due to the advances in legislation?

**DØE:** Yes, it has changed very much. You have to remember that it was not only male homosexuality that was legalized in 1972. It was also straight cohabitation. It was illegal until 1972 for a man and a woman that had no relation to each other, to live together unmarried. This has been a gradual thing. Norway was one of the first countries in the world to stop discriminating against children born out of wedlock. That was an important first step. Now most children in Norway are born out of wedlock. Most people get their children, at least their first child, before they are married. They cohabit and then they marry afterwards, or maybe they marry someone else afterwards. There has been a revolution!

There are various factors here. There is a general loosening of the religious grip, which has wanted us to live in a certain way sexually. It has also been legislation, which has allowed people to do whatever they want to do, as long as they don't hurt each other. There have also been liberation movements, first the women movement and then the gay and lesbian movement. And from the straight point of view there has been the contraceptive debate that has been extremely important. People can sleep around; they don't have to worry about children.

**CM:** What is the relationship of the Church with other forms of diverse sexualities such as transgender or intersexual individuals?

**DØE:** It's very much silenced. When it comes to transsexuals that want to correct their gender surgically, they have come a very long way. Interestingly they have a very a good relationship with the Christian Democratic Party, a group that has been definitely very anti-gay all the way through. But they accept transsexuals that want to change their gender completely and legally.

When it comes to other transgender people, like transvestites and intersexuals this is very much not an issue. We have a very famous person, Esben Esther Pirelli Benestad who does a great job putting a face on these themes. The all-transvestite organization, which is also a transgender organization, but for transsexuals, is one the organizations in the *Human Rights Alliance*, I work with them. We are now trying to get discrimination based on gender identity and gender identity expression also into the legal sphere. Anti discrimination laws are being revised at the moment.

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I remember when we were working on an antiracist law I went to a public hearing at the Parliament representing the *Human Rights Alliance* and said to the transsexual organization that they should come along. We walked in there and they were very confused. They said this is about racism, why are they here? They stood up and said hello we are from the *National Organization for Transsexuals*. We have no protection whatsoever in the Norwegian law against discrimination. And now you are going to tell us why this is. That was a very important eye opener. It has been important to open up politician's eyes. When it comes to discrimination, you always have to look at the margins to see who are those that you don't think about. Where the real discrimination is going is with those who don't have any protection in the law.

**CM:** What is the opinion of the Church regarding this issue?

**DØE:** When it comes to the anti-marriage movement, very many of them are very worried about gender roles being confused. But the gender minorities in Norway are so invisible that the conservative Christians probably hate the very idea of transgender people. They don't even seem to be aware of them, but they will probably find out about them soon.

**CM:** The Marriage Act, the Partnership Law and other legislative advances have very tangible effects on society since they produce new forms of family relations and parenthood, amongst other things. What is the Church's position in regards to this?

**DØE:** There has been a revolution. In 1993 almost all religious organizations were completely against the civil union acts. The only exceptions were the Quakers and Unitarians. Last year when this was debated in parliament, during all the official hearings, nearly all the religious communities who gave responses on this were pro-civil unions. They recognized the necessity and the rights for same sex couples to legalize their relationships.

**CM:** Could you -briefly for the sake of our conversation on religion- outline the types of religions that are present in Norway and their importance? What are the different religions that coexist here?

**DØE:** 82% Lutheran State Church. Most of its members don't go to church, many of them don't even get baptized or confirmed, and many of them don't even get married in churches. But most of them do get married just in case...

The other 18%... I don't know the exact numbers, but we have a sizable Muslim minority, which are a couple hundred thousand strong. We have various small Christian organizations. And we have a very small Jewish community of just around a couple of thousand. We have the Humanitarians and we have a Neopagan community.

**CM:** Do their attitudes -in terms of LGBTQI issues- differ greatly in terms of the political impact they may have?

**DØE:** It is interesting that the Islamic groups didn't have any official reactions to the official hearing on the Marriage Act. But they are decisively anti-gay. The gay and lesbian youth movement and the gay movement have been having dialogues with the National Islamic Council, which is an umbrella for all the various Islamic branches, which are mostly nationally based. The Islamic Council has publicly condemned violence and discrimination against gays and lesbians. They

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say that from a human rights point of view. They also say that homosexuality is not right, but that doesn't keep us from seeing that human rights are important and that they are what keeps society together. They accept the fact that gays and lesbians have the right to live their lives in peace as well.

**CM:** I suppose the situation of citizenship rights within minority communities, for example within gay and lesbian immigrant groups or within the gay and lesbian undocumented immigrant refugees, etc. is different? What is the work that is been done to provide these people with rights based on sexual orientation?

**DØE:** The point is that they are in a much larger degree of social control than ethnic Norwegians are.

**CM:** What do you mean by social control?

**DØE:** Control from their own communities and from their own families. There are greater expectations for them to marry, etc. There is an organization that works especially with these issues, *Queer World*, which is doing very important work with these communities; opening space for these people. Even though the gay and lesbian community is much more open -and it is much easier to get into a gay and lesbian community as a non-Norwegian than it is to get into another ethnic Norwegian community as a non-Norwegian- it is still important that they also have their own spaces.

**CM:** I sense that in Scandinavian countries the main stream has a liberal attitude in relationship to issues of gender and sexual orientation. But when it comes to discussing or criticizing issues of immigration and/or multiculturalism, a very politically correct language is used, which often misses the point about the complexity of the situation. Do you find that this is so? How do you position yourself in relationship to this problem from the perspective of the *Human Rights Alliance*?

**DØE:** That has been a problem. At the *Human Rights Alliance* we work against the politicians. We want equal treatment for all types of discrimination. We don't work on specific issues like that. But you are correct about the fact that things are changing. There have been a lot of misogynous and homophobic attitudes within the various immigrant communities that we have had to accept and tolerate. Because, "Oh you know, it's their culture..." Also, some of them often believe that because they are minorities they can't discriminate themselves. And also a self-perception from the minority communities themselves that because they are a minority they can't do anything wrong. You have to have the same standards; you have to make the same demands from the minority communities as you do from the ethnic Norwegians. We cannot accept families to harass children because they are gays and lesbians.

**CM:** To speak about an isolated immigrant community is not real, in the sense that multiculturalism reflects the fact that there is a new generation of Norwegians that are half-Pakistani- half-Norwegian, for example. There is an overlap of culture and tradition that needs to be closely inspected as opposed to been observed from a far.

To return to the issue of religion, or to ethics more precisely, what are the ethical challenges today regarding what you called a "revolution," in terms of the tolerance or acceptance of sexual

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difference?

**DØE:** I think it is very important to don't accept intolerance. This year the *Frid Ord*, which is a very important organization for free speech, gave *The Freedom of Expression Prize* to Nina Karin Monsen, a horrendously homophobic woman for a horribly written book that argued that gays should not have the rights to hardly anything. It caused a scandal. But all the conservative Christians came to her defense.

We should draw parallels when it comes to Christianity and sexuality; a very important parallel is to look at Christian racism, which was and is still very wide spread. You have to remember that in 1958, 94% of all Americans found that marriage between blacks and whites were immoral. And in the year 2000, 41% of the state of Alabama voted against the scrapping of the law that outlawed marriage between blacks and whites. That was in the year 2000! You should draw a parallel between the civil rights struggle of the past and the gay struggle of today. The Christians hate it and get horribly upset but the parallel is so right and so correct. They need that mirror.

It is a similar issue with Christian sexual racism, as it is described for example in the story of *Sodom and Gomorrah*. Also, in 1999 the Bob Jones University in South Carolina refused a man a professorship because he was married to a black woman. They said that God's plans indicated that it is best for the races not to mix. The sexual issue of Christian racism is so parallel to homophobia that everybody should strategically use it, everybody should know about it, including the Christian homophobes.

**CM:** Is that what you are writing about at the moment?

**DØE:** I use this very much in my book *Sex and Religion*, which was just published. I also wrote about this in some newspapers. When Nina Karin Monsen got the prize I said, now that we are going to celebrate homophobia why don't we celebrate racism next year? It would be very brave to go out and defend racism. But no one would dare to do that. So if you want to give someone a prize for being daring, you should give it to some racist next year. The Christian conservatives got extremely upset and said, no you cannot compare this to that. But I think you can certainly make that comparison!

**CM:** Do you consider that this would be the strategy to tackle homophobia in Norway?

**DØE:** I just think it is very important to not let them get away with it. Don't make them think that the Christian fight against homosexuality is something unique. It is a complete parallel to the sexual racism fight they have been fighting for centuries.

**CM:** For example in the Proposition 8 case in California, it was primarily the Mormons that mobilized for it and gave huge economic support. The worst thing was that based on this kind of moral discourse that they were pushing, they brought it to the polls where they clearly succeeded...

**DØE:** They should have brought this up also in California, especially when it comes to Mormonism, which didn't allow black priests until 1978. According to Mormonism black skin color was originally the mark of Cain. When God cursed Cain he made him black.

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**CM:** What is so threatening about homosexuality and about diverse sexual identities to the Church?

**DØE:** I think this is very much about gender identity because the most important thing about being a man and being a woman is that you will marry a person of the opposite gender.

**CM:** And to procreate.

**DØE:** Well, if you can. Some can't and you can't help that, but still you try to procreate, you should do that at least. So when people marry someone of the same sex, the whole gender identity thing flounders. This connects with the whole debate on a natural human identity.

Also, as they say in *American Dad*, gays are the new blacks. It is always great to have someone to hate and gays are such a visible minority. There are other people who are sexual *deviants* from a conservative point of view, like divorcees, etc. But divorcees don't go around talking about being a divorcee and they don't have divorcee parades... Homosexuals are a very easy target...

**CM:** I imagine that because of your research, the current case in the United States in relation to marriage equality must be quite interesting. What is your take on it, since it is so much based on a moral battle?

**DØE:** I think the gay and lesbian movement in the U.S. has been doing it very right. In America they talk about civil rights and they talk about equal rights. They don't go into morals, but they look at the consequences of discrimination: not being able to accompany your loved one when he or she is dying, losing your children and all these horrible things. I think they are doing it very well. The only thing they should do more is to pull up the race issue.

**CM:** In equivalence...

**DØE:** Yes. Do you remember the *Loving vs. Virginia* case in 1967? The Supreme Court put all these laws on hold, like in Alabama where they kept the law against interracial marriages on paper until the year 2000. The woman, Ms. Loving, who just died last year, also connected her case to gay marriage. She said, "I believe that one should be able to marry whoever they want regardless of color, religion or gender."

**CM:** Something quite devastating in the last general election in the United States was the fact that the gay and lesbian community was clearly supporting Obama, but when it came to Proposition 8, the African American community supported it. It was a backlash in a way. We lost that kind of political unity in that regard.

**DØE:** I think that is why the work that we are doing here at the *Human Rights Alliance* is important, because we use mirrors. Especially when it comes to ethnic minorities in Norway because some of them are often the targets of racism. And they complain rightly about it, and they should, because racism is not acceptable. And then they turn around and they are homophobic themselves. You should use mirrors there too and say, your whole logic, your whole argument against racism falls apart if you are homophobic yourself. Why should people stop being racist if you are homophobic? It is the same thing.

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**CM:** Because they don't consider it quite the same.

**DØE:** But from a human rights point of view it is exactly the same. That is what is used very cleverly now by the queer youth movement and also by the gay and lesbian organization with the Islamic Council. We have to accept people's right to be homosexual just as we accept people's right to be Muslim.