

## TALK TO EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ALL PARTY GROUP FOR SEPARATION OF RELIGION AND POLITICS

- 28 November 2006-

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Powerful voices are again claiming that Europe's values are Christian and calling for Christianity to be enshrined in Europe's constitution.

I wish to argue against those propositions and in favour of a secular Europe - secular, that is, not in any sense of atheist, not in the sense of wishing to exclude religious participation in public affairs, but in the sense of institutional separation of religion and politics, in the sense that our shared institutions and laws should remain neutral and equally accessible and amenable to all of us.

It was the churches who were the original champions of secularism - in order to keep the state out of ecclesiastical affairs. Now the same demand is being made from the other direction - to keep the church out of government.

My arguments are in turn from

**pragmatism** - that anything else would invite the gratuitous alienation of more than half the population

**truth** - that the values are not exclusively Christian and did not start with Christianity

**principle** - with some reference to some pretty basic political philosophy.

### Pragmatism

No-one's freedom of religion or belief is infringed by there being no reference to Christianity in the EU constitution. But the inclusion of such a reference would alienate many & relegate them to 2nd class status.

Including a reference to Christianity is not required by the guarantee of freedom of religion or belief in Article 9 of the ECHR. Instead, including it would breach the ECHR's Article 14 on non-discrimination.

It amounts to an assertion of Christian superiority that contradicts the very values of equality and mutual respect the churches claim to share – in fact, it verges on the imperialist.

Sadly Angela Merkel, who will be the EU's president when it celebrates its 50th anniversary, is quoted as saying that she "emphasised" [to the Pope on a recent visit] "the need for a constitution and that it should refer to our Christian values."

"Our Christian values" - just whose? - well, hers & the Pope's, to start with, but there are many other religions in EU, & maybe 1 in 3 citizens have no religious belief.

The 1957 Rome treaty talked of eliminating barriers but this would erect a barrier; it talked of Europe's cultural diversity - but this would be a denial of that diversity.

Pragmatically we should concentrate on practical cooperation on the basis of our shared values in institutions that are equally amenable to all and not get into a competition for ownership of those values.

## **Truth**

Angela Merkel also said:

"I believe this treaty should be linked to Christianity and God because Christianity was decisive in the formation of Europe."

Now noone will deny that Christianity was influential in European history; and noone will deny that Christians today hold dear the values that we all now seek to uphold - though I add in parenthesis that their own institutions are often not democratic, in contradiction to the most basic of European values, which is why many of us are deeply concerned about the special rights that draft Article 52 gives to bishops who are far more beholden to doctrine than to democracy.

End of parenthesis!

However, some claim that the origin of these shared values lies in Christianity - for example, an Anglican bishop [Michael Nazir Ali, the bishop of Rochester] recently claimed that Christianity gave us equality, liberty, freedom of expression, the dignity of all human beings & even the institution of Parliament.

Philippe de Schoutheete, a member of Roman Catholic bishops' conference's [COMECE's] group of wise men drafting their statement of European values [& former Belgian ambassador to EU] recently claimed that "peace, freedom, a rejection of extreme nationalism, solidarity, respect for diversity and subsidiarity" were Christian values.

This goes too far and creates much resentment.

If we look to the time when Christianity was dominant in Europe, say from the c5th to the c15th, there was little equality, liberty, freedom of expression or democracy – and the church was not struggling for such ideals against the secular powers but firmly on the other side.

Our shared values in fact come from many sources: from Christianity in part, but also from the ancient pre-Christian world and the c17th and c18th Enlightenment, when (for example) The Rights of Man was written, not any bishop, but by the rebel Tom Paine.

## **Political philosophy**

Let us think for a moment of what we are trying to do: to draft a constitution for a huge population with very diverse beliefs and attitudes. Surely we should seek to accommodate the widest possible range of sensibilities - subject to imposition of just those rules necessary for the smooth running of the community.

Now it may be necessary to reach agreement on rules about VAT on goods traded across borders - but it is surely not necessary to lay down in the law that our values are basically Christian!

The political philosopher John Rawls suggested that - in seeking to agree the rules for a community - it would be ideal for the participants not to know in advance what position they will occupy in it.

If at the rule-making stage you do not know if you will end up as a poor immigrant or a wealthy capitalist, then the rules that you draft will have a much better chance of being fair to everyone. Of course, this is not a real-world possibility, but it can be done as a mind experiment.

Let us imagine that we are to re-plan the constitutional arrangements of the EU in this way. We do not know if we personally will end up as Christian or Muslim, Jew, atheist or 'don't know'. We observe the disparity of beliefs in our community & we know that religion & belief are patently a deeply felt - not to say explosive - issue, with a history down to the present day of religious wars and persecutions.

We note that the majority Christian group is deeply and sometimes acrimoniously split between Roman Catholic, protestant & orthodox; that there is an important Jewish group that has survived horrifying recent persecution, that there is a growing minority of Muslims (themselves deeply divided in two camps) and that there are numbers of Hindus & Sikhs and adherents to other religions.

We also know there is a large minority - maybe 1 in 3 - of people rejecting religion and adopting non-religious lifestyles.

Then we should surely arrive at the solution that the shared official institutions of the EU should be strictly neutral as between religions and beliefs. No one should have any privilege in the institutions or laws, let alone in the founding documents.

This is what we call 'secularism', laïcité, official neutrality.

It does not mean that religion has to be kept private and under cover. Many religious people find in their beliefs their prime motivation and we should not ask them to pretend otherwise.

But they need to realise that when (say) they urge a policy on grounds of religious doctrine, they speak only to those who share that religious vocabulary.

If they wish to persuade those outside their own belief group, they need to speak in the shared language of our common values.

If they wish to speak of family planning, of euthanasia, of education, of overseas aid, of abortion, of equal rights for women or for gays and lesbians, of stem-cell research and so on, then they can use doctrinal arguments to their own congregations but they must not try to force their views on the rest of us by demanding 'respect' for them and conformity to them simply because they are religious.

Instead they must use a shared language based on our shared values – and meet the counter-arguments from the experts in these subjects.

That is the requirement of a community where all meet on equal terms in the public space - a community organised on secular principles of neutrality of shared institutions and fairness to all. As the EU's 50th anniversary approaches, it is therefore good to know – as Roy Brown plans to tell us - that other people besides the churches are preparing a declaration of Europe's values on a more inclusive basis than is likely to be had from the cardinals.

## SOME SOURCES

- "We [she & the Pope] spoke about the role of Europe and I emphasised the need for a constitution and that it should refer to our Christian values," she said. "I believe this treaty should be linked to Christianity and God because Christianity was decisive in the formation of Europe."

<http://www.eupolitix.com/EN/News/200608/49897b90-609f-465b-826b-2f48a5e07ab8.htm>

- **Treaty of Rome**

DETERMINED to lay the foundations of an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe, RESOLVED to ensure the economic and social progress of their countries by common action to eliminate the barriers which divide Europe.

### Article 149

1. The Community shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity.

### Article 151

1. The Community shall contribute to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States, while respecting their national and regional diversity and at the same time bringing the common cultural heritage to the fore.

[http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/lex/en/treaties/dat/12002E/htm/C\\_2002325EN.003301.html](http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/lex/en/treaties/dat/12002E/htm/C_2002325EN.003301.html)

- The EU constitution is a "holy text", the leader of the European parliament's centre right Hans-Gert Poettering told the Pope on Thursday. The German MEP used an audience with Pope Benedict XVI to assert the European People's Party's Christian and conservative credentials. He told the Catholic pontiff that the spirit of the EU constitution would live on even if the text could not be resurrected after French and Dutch referendum rejections. "[We] fought for a reference to God in the European constitution. Although we were not successful, we are proud of having done so. The final text does embody essential Christian values," said Poettering. "Whatever the

outcome, the EPP group as an advocate of Judaeo-Christian values, is determined about the spiritual and moral dimension of the European project. Encouragement by your holiness for this aim is vitally important." Poettering argues that in an era shaped by the fear of a clash between the west and Islam, religious politicians play a key role. "Through initiatives with states of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, the group aims for new relationships, for which Christians and Muslims can be privileged partners as believers," he said. "We are joined by a guest from Arabia, a sign of the pioneering work which Muslim and Christian Democrats are doing for a God-centred, more ethical world order." "We do not believe in the 'clash of civilisations', we believe in cooperation, understanding and partnership, if possible friendship, between cultures and religions."

<http://www.eupolitix.com/EN/News/200603/81f6b91e-55cc-4ff4-a335-103a6ca715e2.htm>