



# European Humanist Federation

international non-profit association under Belgian law

## Fédération Humaniste Européenne

association internationale sans but lucratif de droit belge

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### FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

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Are there limits to freedom of religion or belief?

Yes there are, depending on what you want to do with your freedom and on the meaning you give to the word religion.

We have heard a long list of complaints of violations of FoRB by religious representatives. This is appalling and must cease. But the opposite situation exists as well. Where the representatives of the dominant religion make an excessive use of their freedoms. This is the case of the Catholic hierarchies Italy, but not only.

Because our democracies are based on the principle that religion and governance must be kept apart, churches like all civil society associations are free to express themselves in public but should not interfere in democratic decision-making. Or worse, they should not enjoin their followers to abstain from voting so as to make a referendum fail for lack of a quorum, as the Catholic leaders did in Italy in 2005. If, or rather when they do so, they enter the political arena and should be treated at par with other political bodies. On one such occasion, president Zapatero said that religious leaders *may disagree with a law but they cannot say that it constitutes a wound to democracy or a step backward for human rights*.

Religious language is out of place in the public arena and should not be used to impose the morals of the church hierarchy on norms and laws of the state. The Pope and the Vatican hierarchy insist on “*The natural moral order*” whose

principles are, as they say, *non-negotiable*. Says the 1866 Syllabus of Blessed Pius IX – beatified recently - ...*It is not contrary to the natural and divine law that a slave may be sold, bought, exchanged or given as a present.* (J.F. MAXWELL, Doctrine Concerning Slavery, World Jurist 11 (1969-1970), pp. 306-307). Thankfully for us non-negotiable principles changes over time, or so we hope.

Here are a few examples of a reprehensible use of religious language. Abortion has been equalled to *genocide*. Civil partnerships have been qualified the *eclipse of God*. You will remember that when Pope Benedict went to Auschwitz he spoke of the *absence of God*. Pope Benedict uses the word *relativism*, meaning that whoever denies that there is one absolute truth lacks moral principles. Using freedom of expression to demean systematically people who do not believe in God, with disparaging phrases such as *no morals, no dignity, without God there is no true humanism*, or inviting them *to live as though God existed* is an excessive use of religious freedom and a danger to social cohesion.

In 2005 the European Humanist Federation tabled the following recommendation: *wherever a legal text mentions freedom of religion change the wording into freedom of religion and freedom from religion.*

Freedom of religion, like all freedoms, should be used with restraint, with a sense of responsibility towards others and towards society as a whole. This is what is expected from persons who occupy a predominant position, especially considering that through the perverse use of mass media, ideas easily penetrate in the minds of people and become memes. The recurrent one is that there is only one truth, it is offered to me, take it or leave it. To which I respond with a humanist/secular stance, that is with a critical, autonomous, free mind, free from any absolute truth and conscious that the harmony of the human society I live in depends on me as well.

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