



European Humanist Federation
international association under Belgian law
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SEPARATION OF RELIGION AND GOVERNANCE, OF DOGMA AND LAW

Yesterday the EHF held a side-event on the separation of church and state, of religion and politics, of dogma and law, particularly with reference to Western democracies. We chose this subject because we believe it should not be taken for granted that human rights and the rule of law, once established, will be forever abided by. We understand and appreciate that OSCE/ODIHR have focused their attention on some appalling situations which prevail in Eastern Europe and they are certainly doing an excellent job. However, we wish to call your attention on Western Europe as well and on the insistence with which churches are claiming recognition of a public role in national, European and international institutions, given that prevention of conflicts is a major mission for OSCE and given that problems must be named when they arise in order to avoid their deteriorating. sees this as a danger for democracy and, at the High-level conference in Bucharest last June, EHF submitted the following recommendation:

"The struggle for human rights is a vital contribution to the development of democracy, but human rights are threatened by governments that give a privileged position to religious bodies and base legislation on religious morality and rules. We therefore recommend that OSCE ODIHR report on the extent to which these practices are found in member states".

The new *Reform Treaty establishing the European Community* contains a provision (former article 52 of the *European constitutional treaty*) which, although in deliberately unclear diplomatic language, opens the door to an official role for churches in decision-making. Pope Ratzinger greeted this with the words: *our institutional rights are now guaranteed*. We do not know what is meant by institutional rights for churches, but what we do know is: A) that according to the rule of law which is the system of government that our countries have espoused, non-elected bodies are excluded from the democratic process, B) that no public debate was held on the content or extent of such rights although they would change the very nature of our representative democracies and C) that democracy is based on pluralism and freedom of conscience, two "non-negotiable" principles but according to Pope Ratzinger's this is called "ethical relativism" and if you believe in it you may go straight to hell.

Pope Wojtyla made it clear: " Ethical relativism - which holds nothing as definitive - cannot be considered a condition for democracy, as if by itself it could guarantee tolerance and mutual respect among persons and allegiance to majority decisions. A healthy democracy promotes the dignity of every human person and respect for his or her inviolable and inalienable rights...Without an objective moral anchorage, not even democracy can ensure a stable peace (cf.*Evangelium vitae*, No. 70). And the last Pope tells us what he means by "objective moral anchorage". "Authority is a postulate of the moral order and derives from God. Consequently, laws and decrees enacted in contravention of the moral order, and hence of the divine will, can have no binding force in conscience...; indeed, the passing of such laws undermines the very nature of authority and results in shameful abuse". (JPXXIII) Clearly this is an attack on laws respectful of human rights in matters such as sexual and reproductive life, euthanasia, scientific research, etc. But in our view it is also a demonstration of contempt towards our democratic institutions whose decisions are at odds with the moral order dictated by the divine according to the Vatican leaders. This

begs the question: whom should our MPs be accountable to, God or the citizenry?

You may think Pope Wojtyla words are a legacy of the past but no, as recently as last week, Archbishop Tomasi, the Vatican representative at the U.N. Human Rights Council in Geneva, stated that "The presence and influence of the world's great religions was often a way to go beyond the subjective limits of the positivist judicial order with objective moral norms that serve the common good of all humanity". Again moral norms, moral order and a failing memory of the sorrowful moments for human rights which Europe suffered when the Catholic Church was in command.

Obviously this is not to say that religious leaders are not free to speak in public. But there is a demarcation line between freedom of expression for everybody and the use of a privileged position, accompanied by threats of mundane and divine punishment, aimed at exercising undue influence on public life. The Holy See representative at the U.N. stated that: "...the freedom of expressing a religious creed, when authentic, assumes a public function". This is the demarcation line which Catholic hierarchies do not seem to distinguish. It which runs between public (that which belongs to everybody) and private (that which belongs to part of the population and since churches are private bodies their claim to a public role encroaches upon the rules of democracy. For freedom of religion is the freedom for every one to choose and practice the religion they wish, or no religion at all. It is not freedom for churches, even if they are transnational corporations with colossal financial resources to undermine our human, civil and political rights by flawing the democratic principle of separation of church and state, of religion and governance, of dogma and law.

We trust that this eminent assembly will respond positively to our concerns.

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EHF representative to OSCE

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