

Vera Pegna,  
Unione Degli Atei E Degli Agnostici Razionalisti, Italy

ENGLISH only

## UNIONE DEGLI ATEI E DEGLI AGNOSTICI RAZIONALISTI

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Mr. chairman, ladies and gentlemen,

My association the [Italian]Union of Rationalist Atheists and Agnostics is a member of the European Humanist Federation and pays close attention to OSCE/ODIHR documents, meetings and activities related to Freedom of Religion or Belief because we are convinced that the strict abidance by the rule of law means more justice, more equality and a greater degree of harmony for and unity of our people.

A grievous event occurred 10 days ago in Rome which concerns both the rule of law and FoRB and whose scope goes beyond the borders of our country. 140 years ago, on September 20<sup>th</sup> 1870, the Italian army seized the city of Rome and thus put an end to the Papal States and to the temporal power of the Pope. For us Italians this date marks the unity of Italy and for the whole of Europe it marks the opening of a new era of freedom of thought, conscience and religion and of secularism. In recent decades, so as not to offend the Vatican, the mayors of Rome have played down the importance of the event but every year secularist associations have met at Porta Pia - next to the gateway where the Italian army entered the papal state - and have spoken from the podium after the official speakers.

This year the city of Rome commemorated the event with pomp and ostentation. An opening ceremony was devoted to Pius IX, the pope of the Syllabus. At Porta Pia the only speaker was the Vatican secretary of state, cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, who thanked divine providence for the “*new concord of intents*” which now prevails in place of the “*past disagreements*”. After him the only association allowed to speak from the podium was the fundamentalist *Catholic Political Movement Militia Christi*, which is notorious for its disparaging expressions against the rights of homosexuals and against abortion and divorce. (Last year it was sentenced by a Roman lawcourt to pay 60.000 euros damages to democratic associations such as the *Associazione per la Libertà della ricerca scientifica Luca Coscioni* and was ordered to delete false and offensive statements from its website).

Meanwhile the members of my association were pushed 300 metres away from the podium by the police. Their ID papers were taken from them and only returned to them at the end of the event. The police said that the banners bearing the name of our association were “*a form of opposition*” forbidden by superior orders. Other organisations such as the *Consulta Romana per la laicità delle istituzioni* which

federates 22 secularist associations and whose statutory objective is the application of the constitution were denied the chance to speak. The victims of this operation were the principles of separation of church and state, secularism, freedom of speech, freedom of belief, and pluralism.

Thus history has now been turned upside down and a new era has been ushered in under which the day of Italian unity has become the day of reconciliation with the Catholic church. This message has been abundantly publicized by both the publicly-owned and by the major private (but government-controlled) media. In the words of the president of the republic there will be “*an ever closer integration of the history of the Risorgimento, our patriotism and republican virtues with the Catholic culture and its secular meaning for the new humanism often invoked by pope Benedict XVI*”.

Public utterances often need translation. Words such as the “*secular meaning of the Catholic culture*” recall the concept of democracy stated in the following quotations. Pope John Paul II: “*The doctrine on the necessary conformity of civil law with the moral law is in continuity with the whole tradition of the Church. This is clear once more from John XXIII's Encyclical: "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"*( *Evangelium vitae*). And pope Benedict gave this definition of humanism: *a humanism which excludes God is an inhuman humanism (Caritas in Veritate)*; during his visit to the UK he repeatedly defamed atheists and “*aggressive secularism which is a threat to democracy itself, not just to religious freedom*”. The Pope’s idea of ‘aggression’ is daring to argue for a different opinion from his.

These quotations are in line with the Catholic church’s transcendental view of how human society is to be organised but, given that in a democracy all views are legitimate but only those which have been approved by a democratic process have a normative value, this view is in blatant disagreement with the principles of representative democracy and of the rule of law. Moreover, this view ceases to be legitimate when Catholic leaders want to impose it on the whole of society by exercising all manner of pressure on MPs to make the law conform with Catholic doctrine. And it becomes subversive and violates women’s right to health when the Pope himself enjoins pharmacists and doctors to infringe the law on the ground of Catholic conscientious objection - as he has repeatedly done.

I have come here to recount the events of 20 September in Rome because this forum is devoted to freedom of religion and belief and because the defence of the rule of law and conflict prevention are two pillars of the OSCE mission. We are deeply concerned to note that the Catholic church, in its different avatars as the Holy See and the Vatican, is gaining ground in the institutional sphere in other countries too, as well as in the United Nations and in the Europe Union where it sought and obtained

what pope Benedict called “*institutional rights*”. In this light, the episode of Porta Pia is not an isolated episode but one emblematic of a policy that is pursued further and more easily at present in Italy for historic as well as for contingent reasons.

In the history of a country there are times when the ruling class has no vision of society, no plans for the future and the sense of collective purpose goes astray. These are favourable moments for individuals who seek election not to serve their country but to pursue their own private interests. And these moments also favour the re-emergence of the irrational. This is the present predicament in Italy whose ruling class and politicians are all too ready to bow to the Vatican hierarchy instead of defending the principles of our constitution and upholding legality. A recent example is the appeal filed by the Italian government against a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights which stated that the display of crucifixes in Italian public schools violates parents’ freedom to educate their children in the religion or belief of their choice. By contrast, the Italian government maintains ludicrously that the crucifix is a “ *national symbol of culture, history, identity, tolerance and... secularism*”! Meantime the Vatican interprets any loss of a privilege as discrimination and christianophobia.

Legality. This is the key concept that should be borne in mind even in relation to freedom of religion or belief. Because the right to believe and profess a religion or belief of one’s choice, in private or in public, is a fundamental right of the individual, but not a right religious institutions or churches are entitled to since human rights belong exclusively to individuals. Living in Italy and having in mind the overbearing ways of the Catholic church I believe it is urgent to define once and for all the legal concept of “freedom of religion or belief” and examine whether there ought not to be a limit – preferably a self-imposed one – to the unfettered freedom of religious leaders who deliberately confuse god and democracy and use their privileged position - accompanied by threats of punishment both in this world and the next - to exercise undue influence in public and institutional matters. Let us agree that the sacred and the profane belong to two distinct spheres and ought therefore to be kept apart. We cannot have freedom of religion if we cannot be free from it if and when we so wish. If we are to have this freedom, manifestation of religious belief must be made subordinate to human rights and to the rule of law.

Legality, abiding by the law – this is such a fundamental principle in states governed by the rule of law that departing from it, for whatever reason, should be seen as an alarming loss of credibility. Yet the Day of Italian Unity has been chosen to celebrate a closer relation with the Catholic church, that very Church whose prestige has been seriously shaken of late both for covering up crimes committed under its authority and for failing to abide by the law and whose bank (the IOR) is under investigation for money-laundering. “*But IOR is not a bank like other banks...it manages the assets of Catholic institutions at international level and, being located in the Vatican*

*City State, it is not subject to the same law that governs other banks". (ANSA, Osservatore Romano, 22.09.2010)*

So the IOR is an exception but so is the Holy See. It is an exception among states represented in international organisations since it does not represent a state - the Vatican City State - but is the pope himself. Monsignor Pietro Parolin, undersecretary for relations with states explains: "*The Holy See is the Holy Father himself inasmuch as he is an independent, universal, spiritual authority, together with the organizations of the Roman Curia that collaborate with his mission...The Holy See thus requires a particular status, such as that given by the definition of "subject 'sui juris,'" meaning the Holy See defines for itself its juridical organization and does not receive it from outside, and as such, can enter into relationship with other states*" <http://www.zenit.org/article-21139?l=english>. And archbishop J.L. Tauran: "*Canon 113 1 makes clear that "the Catholic Church and the Apostolic See have the nature of a moral person by divine law itself"*" [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/secretariat\\_state/documents/rc\\_seg-st\\_doc\\_20020422\\_tauran\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/secretariat_state/documents/rc_seg-st_doc_20020422_tauran_en.html).

So the sacred and the profane are seated side by side here in this eminent assembly too. But the so-called sacred is self-appointed and claims jurisdiction over us all and all our governments although its record is mainly one that undermines human rights and the very essence of democracy and the rule of law, two pillars of the OSCE mission. My association appeals to OSCE/ODIHR and its member governments to correct this anomaly.

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