

Report to the EN/RE
A Forum 'Religion and politics in the new Europe'
at the European Parliament, Brussels, 27 November, 2007

This forum was co-organised by Catholics for choice and the European Parliament All party Working Group on Separation of religion and politics (GSRP) and sponsored by MEPs from different parties. The representative of the EN/RE undersigned spoke under his personal responsibility.

The Forum took place on the eve of the signature by the governments of the Lisbon Treaty on the institutions of the European Union recently approved by the European Council, which lays down, to the great satisfaction of the Churches, a legal framework for the relationships between EU institutions and religions and other conviction-based organisations. In effect, article.15 ter (art. 52 of the ex-Constitutional Treaty) of this treaty requires the EU institutions to maintain dialogue with these organisations and sets the basic rules for it: openness, transparency, regularity. Besides it opens the possibility of a -challenged- privileged treatment, to these organisations, owing to 'their specific contribution'.

Jon O'Brien, President, Catholics for Choice, opened the debate: « *This Forum brings together those who are on both sides of the debate, many of them for the first time. It takes place in a broad and consistent dialogue on the relationship between our government institutions and organised religious influences (...) We are happy to host this Forum as there can be great misunderstanding about the views of people of faith in the secular state. It is a fact that many people of faith believe in and support the secular state precisely because it protects all of us-- religious or otherwise (...) At this time of increasing tension between secular and religious interests, Catholics for Choice believes that creating greater dialogue and understanding, through questioning ourselves and others is critical in bringing more light than heat to these tough questions of how to organize life and government.* »

A growing pressure of religions

Sophie In't Veld, president, All Party Working Group on Separation of religion and politics said:
« **Secularism is increasingly under pressure.** Religion is back in politics. I am particularly worried about the so-called Intercultural Dialogue, euphemism for dialogue between religious leaders, who claim the exclusive right to define moral values of our society. »

The Churches affirm with growing force that they are 'special entities in the public sphere where they have a role to play'¹, as the new person in charge of the dialogue with conviction-based organisations at the Commission presidency puts it. They stress that 'they do not want to be registered among the lobbies. They do not use the dialogue with a view to defend their own interests only but to influence the European legislation and decisions according to their values. They note that, 'while the majority of the 785 European Parliament members are in favour of the dialogue with them, others show a very anticlerical attitude'. The Comece states that the debate on the Christian roots of Europe is not over. The pope leads, in coalition with other religious conservatisms, the fight against what he calls subjectivism and relativism and for the primacy of moral over civil law. On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Rome treaties he taxed Europe of apostasy because it refuses to recognise officially its Christian roots. But a large proportion of the Catholics see secularism as the guaranty of the freedom of conscience and religion.

The dialogue of the EU institutions with the conviction-based organisations, such as it is being carried out favours religious conservatisms. The presidents both of the Commission and Parliament are personally committed to it. They mostly invited so far high level religious leaders. The Commission carries out the dialogue without transparency and the EP president's invitations

¹ La Croix, 25 novembre 2007, Les Eglises intend to avail themselves of the new European treaty

are but occasions for monologues, whereas a number of MPs demand a debate. « Wrong signals to European citizens», Sophie In't Veld says.

The European construction is secular

The dominant and privileged situation of the Catholic Church in Poland and Spain, set out by Anka Grzywacz (CFC) and Miguel Angel Martinez, deputy-president of the EP illustrated the weight of a long history of symbiosis or alliance between throne and altar in most European countries, while Sweeden offered a recent example of a transition from a state church to separation.

Jon O' Brien highlighted that the European construction, initiated by Christian Democrats, has no religious foundations. Notwithstanding the pressure exerted for nearly a decade by the churches, the Christian roots of Europe are written down neither in the Lisbon treaty nor in the Charter of fundamental rights, which refer to no single religion.

Proinsias De Rossa MEP (PES-IRL) said : « *The European Union is primarily a global exemplar of conflict resolution. The shared democratic and secular institutions of the EU have, at last, successfully dissolved most of the violent, and often religious, conflicts of European history. Democratic institutions are, by definition, secular institutions. (...) The universal rights incorporated in the European Convention of Human Rights and the European Union's own Charter of Fundamental Rights protect those of all religions and of none. No set of religious beliefs should be accorded a special status in the EU. To remain tolerant of all religious beliefs the EU must remain separate and independent of all faith organisations. In this way, we can continue to build a European democratic space where everyone, of all religious persuasions, can be accommodated in full freedom .»*

It was regretted that EU member states accepted that Poland and the United Kingdom be allowed not to implement the Charter of fundamental rights which will be legally binding according to the Lisbon treaty. What language can then be used with Turkey and Russia (a member of the Council of Europe) on the respect of human rights?

The representativeness of religious leaders

The issue of the representativeness of religious leaders was held to be a central one for developing a democratic dialogue of the EU institutions with the religions: these leaders are non democratically appointed, they are exclusively male and they are not apt to represent the diversity within their communities. It has been noted that the diversity of faith and culture is often greater within one religion than between religions.

Therefore the EN/RE and others called to enlarging the dialogue to faith-based and humanist organisations. As regards the NGOs the EN/RE criticized the affirmation that NGOs like enterprises and unlike churches, « are aiming at specific interests ». It stressed that conviction-based NGOs and those fighting for human rights are fully committed to values.

An Algerian speaker of Muslim culture and politically committed stressed the growing power of political and fundamentalist islamism. It is on Europe, where Islam is minority facing established religions and the challenge of secularisation, that the aggiornamento of Islam does depend for a great part. He called to support those fighting islamist totalitarianism and discrimination against women.

The GSRP appeared to be a political space where can be initiated with the joint support of NGOs of religious and humanist convictions concrete actions towards the separation of religion and state, convictional impartiality of the EU institutions and structuring a democratic dialogue not only with religious leaders but also with NGOs of religious and humanist convictions.

HT, EN/RE representative at the GSRP