



STATEMENT ON EUROPE'S SECULARISM

Conclusions of the meeting "Secularism in Europe"

Rome 9-02-2002

In the last few months there have been a number of requests suggesting that the new constitutional arrangements of the European Union should make explicit reference to the Christian cultural heritage of our continent.

Such reference would exclude those Europeans that do not identify with that religious tradition or indeed with any other; in fact, it would be all the more exclusive if general criteria for the interpretation of European laws and treaties were to be inferred from it.

We also believe that the texts of laws and constitutions are not the right forum for defining labels that may reflect the composite historical and cultural identity of Europe, an identity that can be preserved and enriched only through unfettered public debate and free research and through the evolution of civil awareness.

Any statement seeking to authoritatively replace such free debate, hampering and limiting it by a political decision adopted by governments or by a majority vote, would deal a heavy blow to European cultural values and traditions.

We believe it is necessary that the principle ensuring strictly secular institutions should be enshrined in the future constitutional arrangements of the European Union. As a matter of fact, the equal dignity of all citizens, the full respect for the freedom of religion and conscience as well as for the identity of each individual are only possible where public institutions remain absolutely neutral in their attitude to people's beliefs. These are the freedoms that are the most valuable and distinctive feature of Europe's civil and cultural heritage.

Furthermore, as Europe's society is becoming ever more secularised, granting privileges or primacy to one or more denominations would encourage the bad habit of concordats and agreements and pave the way to explosive conflicts in the near future.

Only by clearly enshrining the secular nature of institutions can discrimination and heavy-handed claims on hegemony over people's minds be avoided.