

## **Genoa 2011: In a world without God**

The international conference in Genoa was held over three days with the theme that in a life without God you can rely on a secular morality.

From its attendance alone the conference was far from a flop. The 500 seats of the princely hall of the Grand Council of the Ducal Palace were all occupied for Friday evening's opening session, and the same room was again used on Saturday afternoon with this time an audience of over 300. The workshop on Sunday morning, which had to be booked in advance due to limited capacity of the Science Lecture Room of the Palazzo Ducale, was attended by about 60 people, or one and a half times the number planned, with the result that some people had to sit on the steps. A larger attendance had been planned for the final event on Sunday afternoon which was held in the Politeama Genovese: but no less than 800 people attended, taking up two-thirds of the 1,200 seats.

The first conference, entitled "The basis of morality in a world without God", was chaired by UAAR Secretary Raffaele Carcano who introduced the topic by referring to the Calabrò Bill against living wills as a clear example of how morality as perceived by the people, the vast majority of whom oppose the Bill, is not always in tune with what the Catholic religion tries to impose.

Pievani Telmo, the first of two speakers, immediately warned us against recognising the church as a moral authority, an attitude typical of so many lay people with a moral inferiority complex. This idea was taken up by Giulio Giorello, the second speaker, who identified its origins in the Enlightenment movement, precisely in the paternalistic teaching of Voltaire and Kant who saw the idea of God as a guarantee of morality. Both speakers agreed that morality has no need of religion: rather, religion needs to establish itself as the sole moral reference point in order to legitimize its existence.

Pievani said that the Catholic Church reduced science to a restricted, limited exercise of reason, subject to another higher, larger reason derived from God that takes precedence in case of any conflict, and, despite the commonly accepted facts, supported creationism against evolution, as defined by science, with baseless arguments such as, for example, its alleged experimental non-repeatability. For Pievani the entirely religious principle which saw the presence of man in this world as merely the expression of an inscrutable divine will, a life reduced to a mere toy of a god, without quality or sense, was morally unacceptable.

Giorello continued with talk of radical Enlightenment figures like Spinoza and John Stuart Mill, real examples of how to live a life in complete righteousness without need of any god, based on a humanist morality. Moreover, Giorello asked, where was the morality of religion when it sentenced someone to a "life" in a body half reduced to a machine, or when it was forced to suffer a disease that, for example, could be solved by the use of stem cells?

The second session, with the theme "Think and act in a world without God", was divided into two distinct parts. In the first part, moderated again by Raffaele Carcano, the speakers were Gilberto Corbellini and Simone Pollo. Corbellini explained how the naturalistic, scientific approach was perfectly placed to account for any human activity, although scientific theories

were often, unlike the religious explanations, counterintuitive. Even the foundation of modern democracies under rule of law arose from the diffusion of scientific method starting from the Renaissance, and demographic and sociological studies showed that higher levels of education followed from the rise of atheism and that non-believers tended to be more respectful of the laws and human rights, although in less secularized societies they were almost always regarded as negative and immoral models.

Pollo spoke of how often morality was stretched so as to coincide with the norm, whether civil or religious, when in fact this was only partially true because the concept of morality was largely self-determined by individuals who took responsibility for themselves. Self-determination was a right when it came to making decisions about end of life, or to departing from the familiar “canonical” pattern of heterosexual marriage, but it became a denial of rights in the case, for example, of conscientious objection by gynecologists, because in that case they claimed to shift responsibility for action from those who truly carried it to those who were meant simply to do their duty as doctors.

The second part of the session showed a decidedly international character and was chaired by Andrew Copson, chief executive of the British Humanist Association. The arguments put forward concerned freedom of expression and research, presented by our honorary president Valerio Pocar, and liberal education, presented by the future president of the BHA Anthony C. Grayling.

In both interventions the speakers assumed the need for freedom to perform a critical analysis. Pocar suggested that the ability to conduct critical research was a prerequisite of true freedom, which inevitably clashed with a religion that admitted only one true and valid interpretation, that of divine descent. But to pretend that science acted according to an objective morality was impossible because this would inevitably represent a limitation on its freedom.

Grayling said that the formation of adequate critical thinking skills was what one would expect from an education that had as its objective pluralism and respect for those who thought differently, rather than an orientation towards an ideological conformism, whether based on political ideology or religious beliefs, which taught that there was only one right way to live and which reduced itself to simple propaganda. Even more so in the digital age, when you had to develop an adequate critical ability to assess properly the massive amount of information, not always true and not always reliable, which rapidly spread through the Internet, bouncing round the world.

The third conference, the workshop on “The Ethics of Responsibility”, was primarily for people interested in the topic of morality in non-denominational healthcare (as against confessional healthcare). The workshop was led by Isabella Cazzoli, treasurer of the UAAR, who introduced the theme by telling some of her personal experiences. Speakers included two honorary presidents of the UAAR, Laura Balbo and Carlo Flamigni, and the president of the European Humanist Professionals, Freddy Boeykens.

The focus of the interventions from Balbo and Flamigni was the concept of “care”, meaning care for the condition of the patient involved, compassion, but not pity, as a moral basis for service. Balbo said we had somehow to overturn the terminology currently in use which tends to approach the concept of secularism in terms that emphasize some alleged lack, like the

term “atheist” with its privative root and like the term “non-confessional” in reference to moral service.

Flamigni focused on the concept of human dignity, which called for respect for the person, as opposed to a sacralized dignity that came from God and often led instead to the denial of human rights. These rights were then trampled by Parliament, with laws that equated force-feeding with clinical therapy, or that forbade the donation of gametes, and were trampled in Catholic hospitals, where they were often unwilling to operate on women with ectopic pregnancies.

The intervention of Boeykens was based on an analysis of non-confessional services in various European countries, and began by pointing out the marked difference between the situation of the Nordic countries and the Mediterranean countries, with the first able to boast a cultural and historical tradition that, under the influence of socialist ideologies, brought them before anyone else to behave in a way respectful of human rights, including secularism. The point of excellence was represented by the Netherlands, where counselors were trained in universities and were available not just in hospitals but elsewhere, such as in the army.

In the United Kingdom greater importance was given to secular ceremonies, especially funerals, and the situation was also good in Germany, Norway and Belgium. For Boeykens there were two major issues: the fact that the helper must be clearly identified as a non-believer, which must then find application in practical methods of care, and the fact that we must try to give meaning to the lives of those who may have already lost something or someone.

As well as the three speakers there was space for a report from Flaviana Rizzi of the Turin UAAR, the first to have set up a secular service (at the Le Molinette complex), then followed by the Milan UAAR (at the European Institute of Oncology).

The closing event at the Politeama Genovese theatre was in a completely different tenor from the previous sessions, much less philosophical and more autobiographical. The theme was “Lives without God”, and the interesting lives in question were those of Margherita Hack, astrophysicist and honorary president of the UAAR, and the 1999 Oscar-winning composer Nicola Piovani, while Valerio Pocar was in charge of running the evening with questions and discussions.

Both guests began by describing their early lives, saying that despite living in a society steeped in religiosity they were unable to develop a religious sense. Hack said that her Christian parents, one Catholic and one Protestant, dissatisfied of the respective confessions, ended finally with the practice of theosophy. Then she explained that God was an invention of man who tried to explain natural phenomena with affirmations lacking in foundation, but agreed that science was not yet able to give all the answers because it could only explain the mechanisms underlying natural phenomena, not explain why they happened.

Piovani’s tale of his youth was full of anecdotes, much appreciated by the audience, describing a world full of contradictions, where the deep religiosity that permeated the daily routine was combined with blasphemous curses when things did not go as expected, and where even in tragedy people tried to find something positive to be credited to the saint of the day.

Piovani noted the fact that often in the common language itself religion and secularism were opposed, as if one were the opposite of the other, when instead secularism was a value that could not be ignored that should be pursued both by non-believers and believers, and whose opposite was true bigotry. And the lack of secularism in Italian institutions was of concern to both speakers who made many references to it.

Long and lively debate followed, as was to be expected given the high turnout and the reputation of our guests: more than an hour of questions and comments about what had been said during the evening was a worthy conclusion to the greatest Italian conference on unbelief ever held.