

## THE DISPLAY OF CRUCIFIXES IN PUBLIC BUILDINGS

*Intervention by Vera Pegna on behalf of the European Humanist Federation*

How public spaces are conceived and structured has a decisive impact on the formation of religious/cultural identities, on the creation of interreligious/intercultural relations and on the contribution these identities can offer to democratic and plural citizenship. Social inclusion and social cohesion largely depend on how much public spaces provide fair possibilities to different social, cultural and religious groups to express their conceptions and styles of life and demonstrate their sense of belonging. The existence of a public space where different religious and cultural identities feel at home is essential to the construction of citizenship in a plural society".

<http://www.religareproject.eu/content/public-space>

With regard to the display of religious symbols in public places, I wish to respond to the question that appears under session III: What are the different models adopted in the OSCE area?

The model adopted in Italy but also in other OSCE member states, e.g. Poland and Malta, is to have crucifixes displayed in all public buildings, including state schools and, wherever possible, in open public places like cemeteries, train stations or mountain tops.

EHF Italian member UAAR – the Union of Rationalist Atheists and Agnostics – to which I belong has given its full support to Mrs Soile Lautsi, a parent who claimed before the Italian courts that Italy's administrative norms requiring the display of the crucifix in every state school classroom – norms which date back to the time of Mussolini when the Catholic religion was the established national religion - violated the right of parents "to ensure their children's education in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions" (Article 2 of Protocol 1 to the Convention). Moreover, Mrs Soile Lautsi argued that the presence of crucifixes in the classrooms used as polling stations for voting in political elections had already been found to violate the principle of a secular state, that their display was a "breach of the principle of secularism" and a "violation of the principle of impartiality of the public administration". After a long battle in Italian courts, Mrs.Lautsi submitted her case to the European Court of Human Rights.

Last November the decision of the Strasbourg Court (*Lautsi v. Italy*) upheld the principle of the neutrality of the state in relation to religious and philosophical convictions - that is the principle of secularism - which is progressively being recognised in national and international institutions and indeed in the judgements of the Court itself as the best - perhaps even the only - way of guaranteeing freedom of religion or belief for everyone. Secularism in this sense of neutrality or impartiality is not hostile to religion and is totally compatible with the full exercise of the rights guaranteed by Article 9 of the European Convention. However, the Italian government lodged an appeal arguing that "the cross had become one of the secular values of the Italian Constitution and represented the values of civilian life". Armenia, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania, Malta,

the Principality of Monaco, Romania, Russia and San Marino supported the appeal. The final decision of the Grand Chamber is expected soon.

The indignant reaction of Italian political leaders to the Court's judgement has been almost unanimous.

The Italian minister of defense, Ignazio La Russa, [ranting non-stop on television for four minutes](#) outrageously insulted all those who oppose the display of crucifixes in public schools including the judges of the European Court.

The minister for youth Giorgia Meloni stated: *"I am sick of seeing European bureaucrats decide whether we can hang crucifixes in schoolrooms. The majority of Italians want them and this applies also to a secular state. If somebody feels offended, I advise them to consider settling somewhere else in the world"*. ([dichiarazioni](#) del ministro della Gioventù Giorgia Meloni, 23 January 2010).

The minister for foreign affairs, Franco Frattini declared: *"We cannot accept that the Strasbourg court removes our crucifixes from our schools. This is a non-negotiable principle. If we start making concessions we shall find it difficult even to build a church for fear of offending somebody"*. ([dichiarazioni](#) del ministro degli esteri Franco Frattini, 10 September 2010). Such an acrimonious defense of religious symbols belongs to a culture which is oblivious of human rights and easily leads to hate speech. So it is no surprise that minister Frattini should write on [Osservatore Romano](#), the Vatican daily, that: *"atheism, materialism and relativism" are "perverse phenomena" characterised by "fanaticism and intolerance", that "threaten society" and ought to be defeated by an "alliance between Christians, Muslims and Jews"*.

In Italy and in other OSCE member countries where, to a lesser or greater extent, the Catholic church enjoys a dominant position, the display of crucifixes is but one of the many symptoms of the pervasive presence of the Catholic church in everyday life. The Pope and other members of the Vatican hierarchy appear on public television as often as the prime minister, crying madonnas and miracles of Father Pio are announced as hard facts and given the same importance as a metalworkers' strike. The TV reports that Pope Benedict instructs pharmacists to abstain from selling the morning after pill in spite of the fact that the law obliges them to deliver all the drugs doctors prescribe. The message conveyed by the Italian public TV is that the Pope's instructions are above the law.

The above examples show that it is wrong to look at the display of religious symbols in public buildings irrespective of the general context in which this practice occurs. This as well as other problems pertaining to the non discrimination and equality of citizens arises when the **non** separation of church and state has primacy over the rule of law and over past commitments such as those contained in the Vienna Concluding Document by which states undertook to:

- (16.1) -... ensure the effective equality between believers and non-believers;
- (16.2) - foster a climate of mutual tolerance and respect between believers of different communities as well as between believers and non-believers.

The display of crucifixes in schools and the effect it may have on small children deserves a special comment. When children go to school, starting from kindergarten, they experience a public institution for the first time in their life although they are not aware of it. The way this public institution makes them feel welcome, the way all the children will feel at ease and free to express

their personality in the way they dress or they eat, the way they are encouraged to share their different cultures, will have a decisive influence on their feeling of inclusion or exclusion with respect to their peer group (and, later on in life, to society as a whole) and this experience will start shaping their idea of equality, of the rights of citizenship and of a pluralist society.

In Italy, the repeated display of the crucifix in the school entrance, in the classroom, in the corridors, in the dining-room (such is the case in my grandson's kindergarten in Rome) conveys the message that this school is Catholic and, since it is a state school, it means that the state promotes the Catholic religion. If this is the religion to which the child belongs, it will make him feel more at home and "more equal" than the other children and even entitled to exclude them if he so wishes. Other children who follow different religions or no religion will feel less at home, less welcome. They will accept having less rights since their school wants it this way. They will accept being discriminated against because discrimination established by the state will be viewed as legitimate.

The display of crucifixes in public places is a multi-faceted matter that has many ramifications. If the ruling of the Strasbourg Grand Chamber were to accommodate in any way to the position of the Italian government this would represent a devastating blow to the steady progress of the past few years towards outlawing discrimination founded on religion or belief. It would seriously undermine the right not to be imposed upon by religion of that large but often invisible minority: those, so frequently overlooked, who live without religion and whose voice is weak because by definition disbelief is moderate and strident voices in favour of science and reason are few and far between.