

## **PLURALISM, RELATIVISM AND THE RULE OF LAW**

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

The European Humanist Federation upholds the principles of humanism and of a secular society which translate into our shared principles of democracy and the rule of law. It opposes discrimination against non-believers and campaigns for equal treatment. Our approach complies with the OSCE/ODIHR human dimension and our very modest contribution to the excellent job of ODIHR is in line with Mr. Lenarcic's words: "the subject of our (OSCE's) work in the human dimension is ultimately to improve respect for the rights and dignity of real people who live in all of our participating States". This is what makes OSCE/ODIHR so special: the quest of a genuine implementation of our governments' commitments in the defense of human rights and of the rule of law with the cooperation of NGOs who operate at grassroots level.

Humanist and secular organisations including the EHF represent a few million European humanists, atheists, agnostics and freethinkers but, at the same time, we are aware that the policy we pursue in this as well as in other European institutions is shared by 30 to 50 % of Europeans, people who are simply indifferent to religion although they may not have made a specific philosophical choice. However, theirs is a belief or life-stance just as humanism or religion are one. It deserves to be acknowledged as such and to occupy its rightful place in governments' concern.

Because of the fantastic evolution and circulation of ideas and because of the waves of migrants who have settled in our countries, our populations have become diverse and variegated to an extent that would have been inconceivable a few decades ago. Our societies have become pluralistic. People's needs have changed and so has their awareness of their rights. The more conservative and traditionalist minds find it easier to cling to their inheritance rather than to grapple with this new reality. Now, this is their right under freedom of conscience and so it is legitimate but unless pluralism is recognised and catered for in the institutional and public sphere, discrimination becomes inevitable and social cohesion is at risk. Pluralism assumes that diversity and the free expression and exchange of different political, moral and religious views is beneficial to society and, for this reason, it has become an important component of today's democratic governance where a great variety of opinions exist, especially on ethical matters, and where no absolute truth, no dogma can be imposed by law.

This plurality of opinions and beliefs is what is condemned as 'relativism' by the Roman Catholic Church. But the Church fails to distinguish between the existence of a variety of moral approaches and ethical beliefs in society, of which theirs is just one, and a moral weakness in an individual who adjusts his professed morals to his own convenience. This failure – which we may suspect is deliberate – undermines the Church's pronouncements. The following examples are drawn from Pope Benedict's speeches:

*How many winds of doctrine we have known in recent decades, how many ideological currents, how many ways of thinking... The small boat of thought of many Christians has often been tossed about by these waves – thrown from one extreme to the other: from Marxism to liberalism, even to libertinism; from collectivism to radical individualism; from atheism to a vague religious mysticism; from agnosticism to syncretism, and so forth. Every day new sects are created and what Saint Paul says about human trickery comes true, with cunning which tries to draw those into error (cf Eph 4, 14). Having a clear faith, based on the Creed of the Church, is often labeled today as a fundamentalism. Whereas, relativism, which is letting oneself be tossed and “swept along by every wind of teaching”, looks like the only attitude (acceptable) to today’s standards. We are moving towards a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognize anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one’s own ego and one’s own desires.*

[http://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice\\_20050418\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html)

*Ethical relativism - which holds nothing as definitive - cannot be considered a condition for democracy.*

(Caritas in Veritate, 8)

The Pope connects relativism with democracy which, in his view, does not work without god and recalls that John XXIII stated that:

*Governmental authority, therefore, is a postulate of the moral order and derives from God. Consequently, laws and decrees passed in contravention of the moral order, and hence of the divine will, can have no binding force in conscience, since "it is right to obey God rather than men ". Indeed, the passing of such laws undermines the very nature of authority and results in shameful abuse. As St. Thomas teaches, "In regard to the second proposition, we maintain that human law has the rationale of law in so far as it is in accordance with right reason, and as such it obviously derives from eternal law. A law which is at variance with reason is to that extent unjust and has no longer the rationale of law. It is rather an act of violence.*

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_j-xxiii\\_enc\\_11041963\\_pacem\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem_en.html)

By demanding that parliaments make their laws according to these principles, the Vatican asserts that it is pursuing its mission in the service of mankind because the moral values upheld by the Catholic church are universally valid since they are inherent to the very nature of man. This is a legitimate view to hold, but it is deplorable that it is advanced by means of disparaging those who disagree, who are damned as “relativists”. In Vatican jargon this means a “nihilist”, a person lacking moral values, tossed and “swept along by every wind of teaching”, therefore incapable of resisting every stray “desire”. Whereas by contrast the Catholic hierarchy sees itself as the custodian of a faith linked with reason,

inspired by objective moral values and committed to the defense of man's dignity. Moreover, it claims that its certainties are fundamental for the present shaky European identity.

But is it really so? Do those the Pope damns as relativists match the Pope's description of them? Well, there may be a few people who lack any moral compass, but for the most part do these 'relativists' the Pope condemns not in fact comprise a variety of thoroughly moral and serious people – those who adhere to different religions and beliefs from Roman Catholicism? those who recognise the legitimacy of disagreement about social and moral questions? those who are prepared to tolerate such disagreement, to recognise the plurality of society, while holding their own clear and firm ethical beliefs? those who are not prepared to surrender their own moral judgments to the authoritarian dictates of a church? those who recognise that circumstances may alter cases – that fresh knowledge, new possibilities, may call for a review of morals rooted in mediaeval scholasticism?

I have dwelt on the description of the Pope's "relativists", i.e. citizens who believe pluralism is part of democracy and of the rule of law, because it is essential to understand who the players in the public square are and what choices lie before us. The choice is not between a relativism which denies all values (the pope's idea of relativism) and the Catholic ethics inspired by god, but between a nihilism that denies all values, a dogmatism that considers its values as the ultimate truth and wants to enforce them by law, and a pluralism that respects the different moral stances of all the citizens and is prepared to engage with them. Hence, the Pope's battle against relativism deliberately confuses nihilism and pluralism. It is not the defense of morality in a disorderly society but the arrogant assertion of the Catholic moral doctrine as interpreted by the Vatican hierarchy. Demeaning the others' cultural and moral choices by repeatedly stating that they are void of values reveals the dogmatic approach of the Catholic church.

The supporters of pluralism are not the only targets of the Catholic leaders' strictures. Atheists and agnostics have undergone smear campaigns by the Catholic Church for the better part of two millennia and are still debased in the new Catechism of the Catholic church. We have repeatedly heard that the only total vision of man is the transcendent one, that Without God man neither knows which way to go, nor even understands who he is. (Caritas in Veritate). This campaign still goes on and has been extended to humanism: A humanism which excludes God is an inhuman humanism, according to Pope Benedict. Well, I speak here as an atheist, as a humanist, but also as one whom the Catholic church called a perfidious Jew until the 1960s. The deletion of this abusive term from the liturgy shows that the Catholic church is not totally immune from ethical relativism either, albeit at snail-pace.

At Astana Cardinal Bertone said that:

*Religious life, as an important factor for the social and cultural life of countries, is not only threatened by vexatious restrictions, but also by relativism and a false secularism, which excludes religion from public life.*

I do not know what Cardinal Bertone means by "false secularism". Secularism tolerates no adjectives and is based on the recognition of the intimate connection between democracy,

pluralism and the rule of law. This recognition is the condition for an open and constructive dialogue among, and for the inclusion of, individuals and of groups of citizens each with their own life-stance, religious or non-religious.

A pluralist society does not place limits to the freedom of expression of religious representatives. Secularism does not exclude religion from the public square. What it does exclude is that in a pluralist democracy decisions should be based on religious beliefs. This is why it has become necessary to highlight the potentially subversive content that the imposition of views based on dogmas may have on the rule of law. The European Humanist Federation maintains that only the separation of church and state, hence of dogma and law guarantees freedom of religion or belief for all and the full implementation of the rule of law.