

## **A Secular Vision for Europe**

25 March 2007

On this, the 50th anniversary of the creation of the European Union, we reaffirm the common values that have shaped and guided the foundation of modern European civilisation, and that will continue to inspire and shape our future.

These values emerged from the long experience of our forebears and their sometimes bitter struggles against tyranny. They are essentially secular, that is neutral in matters of religion and belief. They underpin a society in which all peoples, whatever their religion, philosophy or beliefs may live in harmony without favour or discrimination.

The Secular Vision for Europe is neither a manifesto nor a program of action, but a re-statement of the ground rules that enable all Europeans whatever their origin or background to live together in peace and harmony. They are based on an understanding of our common humanity, individual human rights, mutual tolerance, and agreement neither to resort to threats or violence nor to seek to impose our own particular worldview on others.

These values are not those of a single culture or religion, but are universal. They have existed in one form or another throughout all of human history and they find resonance in all of the cultures and religions that make up today's Europe. They entail both rights and responsibilities. The key values are these: the autonomy, dignity and worth of every individual; democracy, human rights and the rule of law; a spirit of openness and free inquiry; and an understanding that the state must be independent of religion.

Finally, we recognise that human rights are individual rights and apply to the individual rather than the group. Every citizen, regardless of their origin or background, must have equal rights and protection, and an equal say through the democratic process.

Our values come neither from divine authority nor from a particular tradition or culture but are deeply grounded in human nature. Many evolved over centuries of struggle against authoritarian regimes and against those who sought to impose their will on others, often by force. They provide rights for the weak against the powerful, and for the individual against the would-be oppressor. They were inspired by the tribulations of history and by our common resolve that never again shall Europeans suffer at the hands of tyranny. Many who fought for these principles paid with their lives.

Our values are the common heritage of all Europeans. We must not compromise the gains that our civilisation has made over the centuries, and that have cost the lives and freedom of so many. We need to educate our citizens, and use every effort to explain and defend our values.

We call upon the people of Europe and all who care for freedom, democracy and the rule of law to join us in promoting and protecting these, our common values.

## **Our Common Values**

“The [European] Union is founded on the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law – principles which are common to the Member States.” Article 6, Treaty on European Union.

The European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms was first adopted in 1950 and has since been endorsed by 46 European States. It became part of the legal framework of the European Union when it was incorporated into the 1993 Treaty on European Union (the Maastricht Treaty). The rights and freedoms enshrined in this convention are underpinned by our common values. We believe that these values need to be more clearly articulated and more widely understood.

## **The Dignity and Autonomy of the Individual**

The dignity and autonomy of the individual is the principle that underlies our most basic human rights: to life, liberty and privacy, and freedom of thought, conscience and religion. It is grounded in the obvious fact that it is as individuals that we act, experience life and suffer pain. This in turn implies that human rights are individual rights and should be vested in the individual rather than the family, community, tribe, culture, religion or group. Individuals will tend to be guided by the norms of their culture, religion and society, but every individual will always be the final arbiter of how to respond to his or her personal situation.

## **Human Rights**

The rights and freedoms of all persons resident in Europe, whether citizens or non-citizens, are defined in the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of 1950, with its five protocols [1], to which all European states are party.

## **Human Rights are Individual Rights**

Human rights are vested in the individual, and must be universally applicable.

No group within society, whether racial, religious or cultural, has the right to override the individual rights of its members. The only rights to which a group is entitled are those that are freely accepted by its members, and every member must have freedom to withdraw from the group.

All groups have rules, but the rules of the group may not violate the human rights of either members or non-members.

Many European governments have actively promoted the policy of multiculturalism, encouraging and supporting calls for group rights from minority ethnic or religious groups. But multiculturalism cannot be used to justify special privileges or disadvantages for any group which do not apply to the rest of society.

## **Democracy**

Democracy is the system of government in which the source of legitimacy resides with the people, and in which every adult person is entitled to an equal say and has equal rights. Democracy is incompatible with dictatorship, where power resides in the hands of an unelected person or group maintained in power by force; with mob rule, where street violence leads to acquiescence; with theocracy, in which ultimate power rests with the representatives of religion; and with nomocracy, a system based on the supremacy of revealed law.

For democracy to be effective it needs safeguards. It must mean more than simply the right to vote. There must be separation of powers between government and the judiciary, the institutions of government must be accountable, and their workings transparent.

In a democracy all people have a say in debates about policy and the creation and development of the law. All must be able to contribute to the debate. But membership of a group, culture or religion can confer no special status or privileges, and no group may be accorded privileged access to the institutions of government. All groups, however, must have the ability to express their opinions.

Final authority must rest with the elected representatives of the people. They must be free to draft and introduce legislation, not merely discuss and vote on legislation presented by some other authority.

But democracy also needs limits. It needs constitutional safeguards that protect the rights of minorities and individuals. Without such safeguards democracy can degenerate into the dictatorship of the majority. In Europe, the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms provides those safeguards.

## **Human Development**

Every member of society should be equipped to participate in the life of the community to the fullest extent that they are able. It is thus a requirement on the community and our social responsibility to ensure that everyone has access to food, safe water, shelter, education and healthcare.

## **Future Generations and the Natural World**

We are all totally dependent on the natural world for our life and well-being. Unless we learn to take better care of the Earth's environment we will put at risk the health and well-being of many living today, and the very survival of those who come after us.

## **The Rule of Law**

Laws must be appropriate for their purpose and administered fairly and without bias.

The law must apply equally to all citizens. No one shall be deprived of his liberty except in accordance with a procedure prescribed by law, such as their lawful detention after conviction, or for non-compliance with a lawful court order, or following lawful arrest on suspicion.<sup>[2]</sup> Everyone who is arrested shall be informed promptly of the reasons for his arrest and the charge against him, and must be brought promptly to trial.

All convicted persons must have the right of appeal.

In civil law, all persons must have right of redress, whether citizens or not.

Demands for separate laws for separate groups in society must be rejected. To accept such laws would be to accept inequality. No-one, no group, may be permitted to take the law into their own hands.

The law should apply to all without discrimination against anyone on the grounds of race, origin, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, wealth or status.

All European governments are party to the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

All states should take steps to ensure that their laws and practices fully conform to their obligations under these treaties.

## **Equality of the Sexes**

The health and progress of any community depends on the ability of both women and men to play their full part in society. Whilst traditionalists may promote the ideal of the nuclear family, this can be used as a cover for the subjugation of women or, at least, of the imposition on the mother of a subordinate role. In some cultures women are not seen as independent autonomous beings.

All European States subscribe to the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). This calls upon all states, inter alia, to embody the principle of equality of men and women in their national constitutions (or other appropriate legislation) and to ensure the practical realization of this principle; to prohibit all discrimination against women; and to establish legal protection of the rights of women on an equal basis with men.

Women like men must have ownership of and control over their own bodies.

Women's unique role in pregnancy and as mothers must not be used to limit their rights and freedoms in society. Women should be able to exercise their reproductive capacity without having to sacrifice their jobs, role and standing in the community.

Women must have equality before the law, and should have equal rights with men in family matters. The decision to become parents should be made jointly and freely by both partners, but the woman must be the final arbiter in all decisions affecting her body, her health, and her fertility.

### **Families and Children**

Modern families come in a wide variety of forms: the traditional nuclear or extended families, single-parent families, unmarried couples with or without children, same-sex couples, even – in some AIDS-stricken societies – children with no parents at all. Whatever form the family may take, the primary responsibility of parents is to safeguard and nurture their children. No child should suffer discrimination because of his or her family circumstances. All are equally entitled to protection and support.

When parents or guardians are unable or unwilling to provide adequate care for their children, social institutions and the state have a responsibility to step in and provide that care. The obligations of governments towards children are set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) to which all European governments are party.

There can be no restriction on the right of any adult to marry, found a family or to the right to divorce.

### **Freedom of Religion or Belief**

For many people, their religion or belief is a profoundly important part of their life and of their personal identity. There can be no laws restricting freedom of belief, but freedom of religion does not extend to practices which could harm the rights of others. Freedom of religion includes the right to change one's religion or belief, or to reject religion entirely.

Europeans are free to practise their religion in any way they choose provided their practice conforms to the law.

There is no conflict between freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief. Attempts to outlaw defamation of religion are misplaced. It is the believer not the belief that needs protection. People and property are already protected by law. Religions and beliefs per se need no other protection and all demands for such protection should be rejected. Defamation of religious believers should be treated in the same manner as defamation of anyone else.

No institution should be immune from criticism. The right to question any belief and to freely express one's views on any matter is a human right. Human beings have human rights, religions, beliefs and ideas do not.

In the words of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, “Problems arise when authorities try to use religion for their own ends, or when religions try to abuse the state for the purpose of achieving their objectives”.<sup>[3]</sup>

### **State Neutrality in Matters of Religion and Belief**

No religion or belief should suffer discrimination compared to any other, nor should any religion or belief be especially privileged, for to privilege one is to discriminate against all others.

State neutrality in matters of religion is the only means by which the rights of all, believers and non-believers alike, can be protected. The neutrality of the state therefore needs to be constitutionally guaranteed.

State neutrality does not free religious groups from their obligation to abide by the law. Incitement to violence, for example, cannot be permitted on the grounds of religious freedom.

Those who seek to reintroduce religious privilege into public life frequently but wrongly equate the secular state with an atheist state, but secularism is not atheism. The secular state is neutral in matters of religion and belief, favouring none and discriminating against none. Only the secular state can guarantee the equal treatment of all citizens.

Democrats, of whatever religious persuasion, have fought to defend the secular state. Many religious are among the most stalwart defenders of secularism because they understand the danger of allowing religious privilege and discrimination to enter government and public life.

### **Social Responsibility and our Duty of Care**

Our sense of social responsibility is founded in the recognition of our common humanity.

We have a responsibility to defend and care for the weak, the disadvantaged and the disabled regardless of their culture or origins. All must be encouraged to play their full part in society. That this responsibility may be wholly or partly exercised through government does not absolve us from personal responsibility.

We seek to create a fair society based on solidarity and social rights <sup>[4]</sup>. Without these rights the dignity and autonomy of many will be at risk.

Every person in exercising their rights and freedoms must respect the right of others to do the same, and no-one has the right to abuse the rights of others.

We should avoid simplistic answers in the search for the solution to social problems, and be guided by reason and pragmatism, and by the principles of empathy and reciprocity. Disputes must be settled by discussion, negotiation or by legal means without recourse to violence or intimidation.

All citizens should be educated in their rights, freedoms and responsibilities, and in our common principles and values.

And we must not forget that our duty of care extends beyond the people living today. We also have a duty of care to future generations and to the natural world on which all our lives depend.

## **Freedom of Expression**

Freedom of expression is, uniquely, that freedom on which all our other rights and freedoms depend. Without freedom of expression how are we to expose or condemn corruption, tyranny, injustice, incompetence or oppression?

Freedom of expression is protected under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which all European States are parties. It makes no exception on the grounds of religion.

Freedom of expression implies that we are free to express opinions that others might find offensive. Without that freedom, freedom of expression becomes meaningless. The price we pay for our freedom of expression is to accept the risk of being offended by others.

As the Council of Europe has noted [\[5\]](#):

“Attacks on individuals on grounds of their religion or race cannot be permitted, but blasphemy laws should not be used to curtail freedom of expression and thought. Freedom of thought and freedom of expression in a democratic society must permit open debate on matters relating to religion and belief.”

Freedom of expression may be limited but only for certain, clearly defined purposes in accordance with international conventions.

## **The Limits to Freedom**

No freedom that involves others can be absolute. In exercising our rights we may not harm the rights or freedoms of others.

Restrictions on individual freedom are permitted by international convention, but must have democratic sanction. It is permissible, for example, to limit freedom of expression in the interests of national security, territorial integrity or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, for the protection of the reputation or the rights of others, for preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence, or for maintaining the authority and impartiality of the judiciary. [\[6\]](#)

Restrictions must be specified in law, pursue a legitimate objective and be proportionate to the accomplishment of that objective.

Restrictions should be the exception and freedom the rule.

## **Tolerance and Respect**

We have a duty to respect the dignity and autonomy of others. Religious freedom is a manifestation of such respect, but there is no duty to respect others' ideas and beliefs. Neither should we demand, nor can we expect, others to respect our beliefs if they find them alien or misguided.

Respect for ideas and beliefs must be earned. It cannot be earned at the point of a gun or through threats of violence. Nor can it be enacted by law. No-one, no philosophy, no religion, no belief, has an automatic right to be respected. Demands to respect a particular religion come close to demands to accept its tenets and practices, and as such are an abuse of the right to freedom of religion or belief.

We should encourage civility and discourage gratuitous offence, but not with the force of law. There is no human right not to be offended, and we must show tolerance when others offend us.

As Karl Popper noted [7]: "We should therefore claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant."

## **Education**

The purpose of education is to fit the individual for life as a full participant in society, and to teach self-respect and respect for others. The Convention on the Rights of the Child defines the purpose of education (in summary) [8] as:

To develop the child's personality, talents and abilities to their fullest potential; to develop a respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations; to develop respect for the child's parents, cultural identity, language and values, and for civilizations different from his or her own; to inculcate a spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of the sexes, and friendship among all peoples, and to develop respect for the natural environment.

Parents have the right to impart their own values and religious beliefs to their children but states have no obligation to support them in doing so. States do however have a responsibility to provide information and education about all religions [9] and widely-held beliefs.

Teaching that one religion is the truth whilst ignoring all others, or teaching that they are false, is not education but indoctrination.

The public funding of faith schools must be called into question since they can be both socially divisive and discriminatory. Governments should ensure that in both state and privately-funded schools, all students have access to education about our common heritage and our shared values and ethics.

## **Violence and Incitement to Violence**

There can be no excuse for individual violence, or for anyone taking the law into their own hands, whatever provocation they feel they may have suffered. Equally there can be no excuse for inciting others to behave violently.

Political, religious and community leaders should adopt the precautionary principle in addressing their supporters, and bear in mind the inflammatory effect their words can have on impressionable minds. The misuse of religious texts to demonize others should be avoided. Society must hold the preachers of violence accountable for the effects of their preaching.

A tendency by one section of society to react violently to provocation, or to use threats or intimidation, can have a chilling effect, leading to self-censorship and the stifling of necessary debate. Violent reaction to provocation is a manifestation of intolerance and cannot be tolerated in a civilised society.

## **Freedom of Inquiry**

It is only through the exercise of free inquiry, both historical and scientific, that humanity has learned of its origins, of our relationship to our Earthly environment, and our place in the Cosmos.

We should promote respect above all for intellectual honesty, and for the supremacy of reason and the scientific method in the search for knowledge. No subjects should be taboo in the search for knowledge. Free inquiry must be limited only by respect for the rights of others and by concern for all sentient creatures.

## **Artistic Freedom**

Artistic freedom is one of the hallmarks of a free and progressive society. Like any other manifestation of freedom of expression, artistic freedom is often attacked by those who feel offended by its exercise. But artistic freedom is essentially about the presentation of ideas. Ideas do not have rights, and it is the market place of ideas that in the end must be the judge.

Equally, those offended by art have the right to peaceful protest, but not right to intimidation or violence.

## **Cultural Diversity and Minorities**

Historically, many European states were based on a single linguistic and ethnic group sharing a common culture and religion. Many states still have a single national language and many also have a state religion. But since World War II immigration into Europe has profoundly changed the ethnic, cultural and religious makeup of European society. Cultural diversity has brought colour to our lives and a greater awareness that we all, regardless of our origins, share a common humanity.

Several European governments responded to immigration and increasing cultural diversity by promoting the idea of multiculturalism, with each community able to continue with its own language, customs and practices but with little or no encouragement to adapt to the western way of life. Unfortunately this has led in some cases to neglect of the special needs of the members of immigrant communities, and to the inability of many to be able to play their full part in society.

The response of governments must be to make greater provision for the needs of minorities; to enable those who wish to retain their strong cultural identity to do so, but not at the cost of denying them the opportunity to participate fully in European society.

## **Conclusion**

The principles and values on which European civilisation is founded are once again under threat. We call upon the people of Europe and all who care for freedom, democracy and the rule of law to join us in promoting and protecting them.

Committee for A Vision for Europe, Brussels, 25 March 2007.

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[1] *European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*: <http://www.hri.org/docs/ECHR50.html>

[2] *Ibid*, Articles 5 to 7.

[3] *Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE)*, *Recommendation 1396* (1999).

[4] *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, 1976 <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/cescr.htm>

[5] *Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe*, *Resolution 1510* (2006)

[6] <http://www.hri.org/docs/ECHR50.html> Article 10.2

[7] "A Pocket Popper", ed: David Miller, Fontana, London 1983

[8] For the full text see *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Article 29.

[9] *PACE resolution 1510* (2006): "States should support information and education about all religions so as to develop a critical mind; to teach about religions as sets of values towards which young people must develop a discerning approach, within the framework of education on ethics and democratic citizenship; to promote the teaching of the comparative history of different religions, stressing their origins, the similarities in some of their values and the diversity of their customs, traditions and festivals; and to encourage the study of the history and philosophy of religions and research into those subjects at university.