



Speech by EHF President Giulio Ercolessi

European Parliament Article 17 Conference

“Discrimination and Persecution of non-believers around the world”

From what I heard in the first panel, I think I can say that we are quite satisfied that the relationship between our organisations and the European Parliament are improving. At the start, the dialogue with the “non confessional” group was a little bit timid at the beginning, it was rather different through its different periods; nowadays it seems to me it is on the right path. Thank you, Madam Vice President, for being instrumental in this endeavour.

Thank you also for choosing this topic for this session. We advocated that something like this would be discussed. We think this is an extremely important topic for our times, not only for the rest of the world, but also for Europe itself.

I will focus on a probably unexpected regional perspective in the treatment of apostasy: the European one.

In the last few years the awareness of how serious the problem of freedom of thought and conscience has become in many countries for religious people has grown much keener and much more common. Especially the persecutions of Christians and Jews in many countries where extreme islamist fundamentalism and jihadism are rampant has been the focus of the interest of the media and of some political interventions. Rightfully so, of course, also in our opinion.

The same awareness is unfortunately often still missing with regard to the fate of the even more severe persecution of other groups of people that do not comply with the pretensions of extreme fundamentalists: that is, humanists, atheists, agnostics, rationalists, religious reformers too, and all those whose life stance is incompatible with extreme fundamentalists’ pretensions, beginning with feminists and Lgbti persons. They are all mostly amalgamated as apostates by the extreme fundamentalists.

It often happens that this is sometimes an “even more severe persecution”, I said, but it is not just my opinion, it is the opinion of the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief in his annual report of 2017, and that’s for well known reasons: to the “People of the Book” is sometimes recognised, even by some of the fundamentalists, a sort of protection that non believers (“heretics”) are, in the eyes of many of them , not entitled to.

On paper, international and especially European human rights standards require that freedom of thought and conscience in the domain of religion be equally guaranteed to believers and to non believers. In practice, if we consider the sort of attention reserved to non believers, their fate is somehow considered a comparatively minor issue. But their sufferance is definitely not minor.

Freedom of religion for believers is rightfully considered in our countries the historical origin and a cornerstone of individual freedom. But freedom from religion is often considered in some way a less sacred human right.

This is quite obvious also in the behaviour of our politicians and institutions, in many of our countries and sometimes even at the EU level. But in the EU art. 17 of the treaty on the Functioning of the EU provides for equal respect and equal treatment for “churches and religious associations or communities” on the one hand and “philosophical and non-confessional organisations” on the other. Would anybody here be surprised if I said that, at state level in many of our member countries, churches are usually treated with a much higher degree of reverence than our people? And even here, when we celebrate, for instance, the European cultural heritage, a sort of informal hierarchy of relevance, and also of dignity, is always very obvious, and many political leaders – not always the most populist, certainly not always the most extreme or the least influential – openly support this argument without restraint or reservations.

That’s probably why, with few exceptions, European politics largely ignores or underestimates the fate of the great number – impossible to evaluate – of foreigners that feel obliged to camouflage themselves in the great wave of migrations and flee from theocracies in search of freedom: freedom, also, from political or social religious impositions.

We often disregard these lovers of our model of constitutional liberal democracy. Yet, we are the most secularised of the continents in the world today. And our democracy, including these very institutions, are at least as much the offspring of antitraditional and antidogmatic thinking, of the Enlightenment, of rationalistic philosophy, of formalised legal and constitutional provisions, as they have – mostly less direct – roots in what is often called today the “Judeo-Christian heritage”.

This is possibly better seen from outside than inside our Union, and through the same media that so often are the vehicle of religious radicalisation here in Europe.

That’s why, opposite to the populist narrative that only wants to see all immigrants as the worst enemies of our civic values and constitutional principles, within the large wave of immigration towards Europe there are many would-be fellow citizens of ours that cherish those values and principles much more than populist electors and politicians. Because they experimented what their absence means.

I saw this first-hand last year, when I took part in a debate in a conference hall of the Italian Chamber of Deputies to mark the tenth anniversary of the law that provides for humanitarian protection in Italy to Lgbti persons persecuted in their countries.

And I saw this five years ago in Cairo, when I took part in a conference organised by the European Liberal Forum and the Naumann Foundation with Arab liberals. At coffee break, after participating in a panel on religion and politics, a lady behind me I never met before introduced herself as an atheist: I was on the point of saying “nice to meet you, I am Giulio Ercolessi”. But she told me I was one of

the very few persons with whom she could make her coming out as an atheist, without the real risk that sooner rather than later the wrong and extremely dangerous persons could come to know.

When they arrive among us, we never encourage these migrants to show up. On the contrary, they are for many of our countries political leaderships a matter for embarrassment. In some countries we even channel most of the welfare benefits directed to them through the organisations of the interreligious dialogue: Christian parishes working together with the often self-appointed and not rarely fundamentalist local imams. Some TV channels prefer to give voice in their talk-shows to Muslim women wearing at least a scarf, and discriminate those who wear more mainstream garments, because they attract a smaller audience; and some self-styled “progressive” parties do the same when they look for candidates with an immigrant Muslim background. No wonder if most secularist migrants prefer to stay silent.

Giving them a say, encouraging them to come out, to speak out and vindicate their choice is not only a political and ethical obligation for all those who believe in open societies and individual freedom. It could also help change the attitude of many of our fellow citizens and electors: at least the attitude of the many among them who fear migrations not because they have ethnic or racist prejudices, but because their lack of information leads them to see in all migrants a risk for a renewed kind of obscurantism. Secularist migrants could also be a precious tool in the hands of mainstream politicians opposed to the populist threat. It is not only a moral mistake, but also a stupid political move not to entice them into taking part in our public debate.

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