

State Support

Religare introduction: *This theme encompasses State support to religious and secular groups. The research aims at assessing the reasons that justify – or not – the public funding that is in place today. The State position and the religious communities' point of view will be taken into account. The research will consider several issues: training and remuneration of the religious leaders, media, religious heritage and the current taxation typology.*

We look first at the extent of support for organisations based on religion or belief. It is our experience that very few people realise the extent of the financial and other support offered to religious bodies - overwhelmingly to the Christian churches - from public funds. We estimate that it totals many hundreds of millions of Euros every year even if only 'core' funding is counted.

For example²⁹:

- in France churches built before 1905 are owned and maintained by the state at a cost of about €100 mn pa, and local authorities provide housing for priests at a cost of €54 mn pa.;
- Greece pays for the training, salaries and pensions of Greek Orthodox clergy and for their church buildings;
- the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland receives 1.63% of the proceeds of corporation tax;
- in Italy 0.8% of income tax goes to registered religions or to the state as nominated by each individual taxpayer - but 60% of taxpayers indicate no preference and their tax is divided up in the proportions indicated by the 40% who do with the result that the Roman Catholic Church receives 87% of the 0.8% of income tax;
- the established church in Denmark receives Government grants worth about €100mn. pa.
- The Czech Republic subsidises all registered religious groups to a value of something under €100 mn.
- In Germany direct subsidies to churches from individual Lander total €460mn. pa.³⁰;
- Hungary subsidises clergy in villages with under 5,000 people at a cost that exceeds €100 mn. pa.

Meanwhile in Poland public land and buildings to a value estimated at €24 billion have been handed over to the Roman Catholic Church under a law of (alleged) restitution, and in Romania more public money has been spent in recent years on Orthodox church buildings

²⁹ We rely for most of the data in this section on "Church and State - a mapping exercise" by Frank Cranmer, John Lucas and Bob Morris (April 2006 - ISBN: 1 903 903 47 6) from The Constitution Unit, University College London, available at <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/spp/publications/unit-publications/133.pdf> - accessed 6 April 2013. NB that a more up-to-date version of this paper is available at http://www.law.cf.ac.uk/clr/networks/Frank%20Cranmer_%20Church%20&%20State%20in%20W%20Europe.pdf - accessed 6 April 2013.

³⁰ Der Spiegel 24/7/10.

than on building of schools and hospitals combined.

In addition there is equal or greater support in the shape of public financing of schools, hospitals and other mainstream public services run by the churches - and our experience is again of public ignorance of the fact that the level of church financial support of such services is typically very low, so that while the cost is mainly met by the taxpayer the church or religious charity is given public credit for its work. While the majority of such subsidies is obviously spent on provision of the services in question, they provide a hidden support for the churches in the shape of employment, opportunities for delivering religious messages and collecting donations, and income from charges for administrative and other services.

Further government support for the churches comes in the form of statutory and administrative backing for the collection of church taxes, which are often legally compulsory for registered members of a church. For example:

- in Germany, recognised churches can levy a tax on their members which is collected with federal income tax; and individual Lander have similar arrangements - these taxes produce about 80% of church income;
- Iceland has a compulsory church tax that taxpayers can assign to any registered religion - but humanists cannot register as a 'religion or belief' and assign theirs to their humanist association;
- Denmark and Finland both have established churches and their members (in each case accounting for about 80% of population) have to pay a church tax;
- there is a similar arrangement in Austria.

While these taxes are in one sense voluntary, they can be avoided only by leaving the church, while without the legal backing given them by the state the amounts contributed would without doubt be much lower.

We have not referred here to financial support or exemptions from taxes or other charges given to churches or religious organisations not by virtue of their status as such but under a more general rubric, such as tax relief for charities or other voluntary organisations or payments for the preservation of historic buildings or other cultural purposes, since we have no objection to this as a general principle.

It is very rare for similar support to be offered to humanist or *laïque* organisations. It happens in Norway, Belgium, to a limited extent in Finland and Germany, and in the Netherlands some public functions are delivered through organisations representing the constitutional 'pillar' beliefs, including Humanism.

We turn now to our assessment of the acceptability of such support. We believe that subsidies from the taxpayer to churches and other religion or belief organisations are highly objectionable and contrary to the principles of equality and non-discrimination and of the secular state.

- They provide support from common funds and resources to organisations promoting controversial beliefs that are not shared by (at best) more than half the

population of Europe.

- They are inevitably selective: at the least there must be a delay before new beliefs or organisations are recognised and registered so as to become eligible for support, while in practice support is usually limited to one or a few traditional churches, adding to the inequality of the system.
- They involve the government - the state - in assessing the acceptability of religions, a function for which it is singularly unqualified and which it is objectionable for it to undertake. Like the courts, governments should stand aside from evaluation of religions and beliefs. Otherwise they will be faced either with subsidising all without distinction, including potentially anti-social religious cults, or with making distinctions between desirable and undesirable religious movements, a task for which they have no relevant qualifications.

Even if our own organisations were offered the same privileges on an equal basis we should still have serious objections, on grounds both of principle and of practice. The objections of principle quoted above would still apply, but the practical objections - which amount to the inevitability that the system would be indirectly discriminatory against non-religious beliefs - are worth some explanation.

Christians - and to a large extent followers of other religions - are required to come together in congregations, to support their institutions, and to conform to their mandates. This is untrue of humanists and secularists. It is a central part of our beliefs that we have the responsibility to act, to think as individuals, to work out for ourselves - albeit as members of a community - how best to behave. Moreover, Christians tend strongly to carry out their social and charitable work through their own organisations, flagged as Catholic or Christian (albeit often benefiting, as stated above, from public subsidies), whereas we support general, secular charities that carry no religion or belief label. This is because we believe in cooperation, in collaboration with others wherever it is possible, not in a divisive segregation that stresses an irrelevant religion or belief identity in the social and charitable work we undertake.

Nor is it any part of our beliefs that we need to join humanist or secularist organisations. Insofar as we succeed in achieving open, democratic, secular societies in which religious privilege and power are reduced or eliminated, the need for our organisations is diminished and fewer and fewer people will join them - only those, ultimately, who are interested in the philosophical and theoretical foundations of the beliefs. Therefore the small numbers formally linked to our organisations are paradoxically an index of our strength rather than our weakness: if we were under a more severe ecclesiastical or theocratic threats we should undoubtedly find many more members!

Official support for churches and religious organisations amounts, in our view, to a life support system for moribund churches. Without the huge financial support churches in Europe currently receive, they would be unable to operate on their present scale and to exercise the disproportionate influence they do now. On a personal level, the effect is to make for an ossification of beliefs and attitudes: the outlets for thinking about ethical questions are dominated by the churches and religious institutions, making it difficult for fresh, and in particular secular, thinking to gain any ground.

Either there should be equality of support for humanist organisations as in Norway or there should be a phased withdrawal until there are no subsidies for any religion or belief as such. Our preference is for the latter policy.

Conclusion

We hope that these considerations will be of value to your study. While they appear wide-ranging, they are far from comprehensive, and there are contentious areas of public policy that have not been touched on as being too remote from the framework of your four topics.

Our views are firmly based on human rights, democracy, respect for other cultures, non-discrimination, equality and tolerance. We believe - and the Eurobarometer surveys quoted above lend strength to our belief - that these are among the values closest to the hearts of people in Europe and therefore best fitted to be the foundation for public policy. We recognise that some people, including devout religious people, set other values alongside these: values, perhaps, of obedience, respect, tradition and sanctity. However, these are neither so valued nor so widely shared and are therefore less fitted as the foundation for public policy. They are also liable in their implementation to restrict directly the personal freedom of people who do not share them, whereas the effect of founding policy on equality, non-discrimination and human rights is criticised and deplored by devout traditionalists much more for its supposed effects on society at large than on them personally: they remain free to live as they wish even if unable to require others to live similarly.

19 January 2011

References updated 6 April 2013.