European Humanist Federation

Religion in Society

**A memorandum to the Religare Project
on religions, belonging, beliefs and secularism in Europe
on the Project's four research themes:
Public space / The Workplace / The Family / State Support**

The European Humanist Federation welcomes the Religare project on "religions, belonging, beliefs and secularism in Europe". The right to freedom of religion or belief is very dear to us, and we regard the question of how to reconcile that freedom with other potentially conflicting freedoms in a liberal democratic society as one of the most important facing Europe today.

This memorandum provides comments on each of the four initial Religare themes concerning religion in society (namely, the family, public space, state support, and the workplace) but prefaces these with some general remarks about religion and belief in Europe in the 21st century.

Religion in 21st Century Europe

Our starting point has to be the historical importance of Christianity and the churches and their continuing importance in the lives of many Europeans. A key thread running through the history of Europe for 1700 years has been the Christian religion and the Christian churches. Christian monasteries took over from the Arabs the preservation of classical learning, melding Greek philosophy with Christian theology. Christian stories no less than classical myths provide the subject matter of European art and poetry. Christian beliefs and moral philosophy have shaped our lives, culture and thinking. Christian causes have provided the justification for wars and differing interpretations of Christian teaching have provided the framework for social struggles.

For centuries there was simply no alternative to Christianity. When the Reformation broke the monolithic domination of Rome, thinking still did not stray far from the alternative versions of Christianity then developed. The Roman church remained powerful and the new churches grew in power, frequently allied with secular government and seen as the unquestionable source of moral authority. Only in the last few centuries have alternatives to Christianity become available, including not only non-Christian religions but also the possibility of living entirely without religion - something that until recently many found it

difficult to imagine (a mid-nineteenth century encyclopaedia of religion[1] says of "explicit and openly avowed atheism" that its "existence has been doubted and even denied by many wise and good men, both in ancient and modern times"). It is only within our lifetimes that rejection of religion has become for the most part socially acceptable and that challenges to religious morality have been seen as other than inherently wicked.

Even more recent is the development of our multicultural Europe. We now entertain a plurality of religions and beliefs, not only in the sense that immigration has brought us small populations of (principally) Hindus and Sikhs, Buddhists and Muslims to add to our resident minority of Jews but also in at least two other senses: first, that these and other religions have found adherents from the native population of Europe, and second, that Christian belief has become much more varied and personal, much less doctrinally orthodox, than ever before.

These developments attracted little attention until 2001. Religion was seen as a personal choice and not on the whole as a social issue, and it was as ethnic, not religious, minorities that immigrant populations attracted the attention of politicians. Since 9/11 the focus for politicians and commentators has sadly but inevitably turned to Islamist extremism, and it has been through that distorting lens that they have approached the question of social adjustment to the small but significant Muslim minority now found in most European countries. This is understandable but worries over terrorism and immigration must not be allowed to distort the overall picture.

The consequences of these fairly recent changes are still being worked out, and the Religare project may contribute to their resolution.

The fundamental questions have to be: given changes in social thinking, the growth of non-Christian religions and the decline in Christian belief, to what extent can the churches retain the positions of formal or informal power that they have customarily held in almost all European countries for centuries? and if they are losing influence as touchstones for social and moral decision-making, what can take their place?

One unquestionable achievement of the recent past is the establishment of freedom of religion or belief. In some parts of the world having the wrong religion, still more apostasy from the dominant religion, entails a risk not just to liberty but to life itself. In Europe, freedom of belief is far from perfectly guaranteed but it is effectively unchallenged as a principle and those who still harry religious minorities, particularly in some parts of eastern and central Europe only recently free from Soviet domination, feel compelled to provide administrative or legal justifications, however paper thin.

So, in most of Europe and in all its international treaties the freedom of the individual to adopt whatever religion or belief he or she wishes is unquestioned, and the price to pay for

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[1]   Revd. James Gardner MA: *The Faiths of the World* etc, London & Edinburgh: A Fullarton & Co. 1860: it quotes, for example, the celebrated Dr Thomas Arnold as saying "I confess that I believe conscientious atheism not to exist." See http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc2.ark:/13960/t6b284r2r#page/247/mode/1up - accessed 6 April 2013.

an eccentric choice is generally not grave. Noone would have it otherwise. The *forum internum* is safe from assault, whether one's beliefs produce rejoicing in anticipation of salvation, despair at innate and ineradicable sinfulness - or wholesale rejection of religion. For it is vital to remember at every stage in this discussion that freedom of religion or belief applies equally and unquestionably to those who reject religion, to those who adopt non-religious beliefs (such as Humanism[2]) - and to those the European Court of Human Rights has called "the unconcerned" who cannot be bothered with religion or belief at all but simply wish to get on with their lives. (See Annex I on the legal background.)

Now religion for some is inspirational and provides the foundation and purpose of their lives. It may prompt them to lives of unselfish service and provide them with a community beyond their families that supports them and can be an agent in society that multiplies the effect of their individual efforts. This is admirable and (with minor quibbles) to be wholeheartedly welcomed.

But religion can also provide negative experiences. The misery that beliefs sometimes bring on those who hold them is a matter for them alone, along with those who love them. But the effects of religion on those who do not believe or who have other beliefs are potentially a matter for society as a whole. It is in the *forum externum* that reside the problems over religion in society. They involve no challenge to the freedom to believe what one will: rather, they are focussed on the risk that one man's beliefs may induce behaviour that affects another man's freedoms.

And some undoubtedly experience what they feel as oppression by religious institutions, inhibiting their freedom in what can at worst be a totalitarian way. The Westphalian settlement was an advance in its day but it took time to transmute *cuius regio eius religio* from a freedom for the rulers of nations to choose which religion to impose on all their subjects into a personal freedom of belief for each of those subjects - and in some countries in Europe that transformation has not yet been completed.

The effects of religion or belief in the *forum externum* is what the European Convention on Human Rights calls the manifestation of belief - and freedom to manifest belief is also protected - though, unlike freedom of belief itself, it enjoys no absolute guarantee but is

> subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others. *(Article 9(2))*

Attempts are still occasionally made to promote Christianity as a factor binding Europe together. Our shared inheritance and history, it is said, are those of a Christian continent, our culture and values are Christian. But these claims are matters of dispute, as was seen when attempts were made to insert them in the preamble of the putative European

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[2]   See http://humanistfederation.eu/humanism-secularism/humanism/ - accessed 6 April 2013.

constitution. We share a history in which Christianity played a large part - but it may still divide rather than unite. Our culture, our values are in part Christian, but they also have other roots: in the classical world, in Enlightenment thinking, in our common humanity. And church power has produced alienation just as free thinking has produced rejection of Christian belief.

It is fundamental that the Religare project must take serious note of the extent to which religion - and in particular the Christian churches - are now rejected by the people of Europe. If the project starts from a lazy assumption that religion can still be a binding factor, that all that is needed is some tweaking of age-old inherited assumptions, it will be a failure and will only add to this alienation.

Polls and surveys provide the evidence. First there are those that demonstrate how many people in Europe have rejected religious belief. The EU's Eurobarometer survey found in 2005 that in its then 25 member states only 52% of people believed in God while 18% rejected outright even the idea of 'some sort of spirit or life force'.[3] Similar results are found by both popular and academic surveys[4]. Other surveys show how limited is the knowledge of self-proclaimed believers of their alleged religion - an ignorance that undermines the claims of churches to represent those who have actually created their own eclectic and often shallow beliefs.

More significant are those surveys that demonstrate people's attitude towards religion and the churches regardless of their personal beliefs. For example, in 2007 Eurobarometer found that 46% thought religion had too important a place in society[5], a result similar to that in a UK Ipsos MORI poll in 2006 which found that 42% of people in Britain thought that Government "paid too much attention to religious leaders"[6].

Not only that, but religion is not seen as important by Europeans. Half of them may in some sense believe in God and even more have a cultural affiliation to Christianity but Eurobarometer found that, when asked to pick up to three from a list of twelve 'values', people in Europe twice placed religion last: only 7% chose it as important to them personally and only 3% saw it as a value representative of the EU.[7]

It is plain therefore that Christianity cannot provide the binding factor for 21st century European society. However, in the present context it is insufficient merely to recognise this

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[3]   Eurobarometer special survey: Social values, Science and Technology (European Commission, June 2005) available at http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_225_report_en.pdf - accessed6 April 2013.

[4]   For a summary of academic surveys see Phil Zuckerman: 'Atheism: Contemporary Numbers and Patterns' in The Cambridge Companion to Atheism, ed. Michael Martin, Cambridge University Press, 2007; ISBN 978-0-521-60367-6.

[5]   Eurobarometer 66: Public Opinion in the European Union (European Commission, September 2007) available at http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb66/eb66_en.pdf - accessed6 April 2013.

[6]   http://www.humanism.org.uk/news/view/156 - accessed 6 April 2013.

[7]   Eurobarometer loc. cit. [In 2010 when the same question was repeated only 6% chose religion.]

fact: it is necessary also to examine the consequences of such a fall from grace. Noone of course has any intention of challenging the religious freedom of believers or the freedom of the churches to manifest collectively the beliefs of their adherents and to preach their faith to the world. But the churches have inherited from the days of their past dominance, when it was arguable that they did provide the glue to hold society together, numerous privileges that, now religion is no longer a binding factor but one that tends to divide, must be called in question. The most egregious such privilege is probably the 26 seats in the United Kingdom Parliament reserved for Church of England bishops, but there are many others that are probably more serious in their practical effects, many of which arise from the strong tendency of politicians, at least in public, to show unquestioning deference to religious institutions as authorities on morality and as arbiters of social policy.

This is not the only consequence of religion no longer being a social glue - or to be more accurate, of it binding only a part of society together and tending to alienate much of the rest. Both these tendencies - to bind and to alienate - need to be taken into account in considering its place in society. Together, indeed, by binding co-religionists together and alienating those of other beliefs, these effects of religion can become socially divisive to a serious extent, so that people live segregated lives with little knowledge and correspondingly much misunderstanding and suspicion of people of other beliefs. The dangers are vividly illustrated in Northern Ireland, where despite the end of violence the two communities remain almost as far apart as ever.

In approaching questions relating to the place of religion in society, therefore, the European Humanist Federation starts from the values to which the people of Europe give their highest levels of support as personal and as European values. These were, according to the Eurobarometer survey already cited, human rights, democracy, peace, and the rule of law. After these came respect for other cultures, solidarity, support for others, equality, respect for human life, and tolerance. Here without doubt is what now binds Europe together - our new social glue.

These are essentially humanist values. They are not unproblematic, since they sometimes conflict with each other, but they all bend towards freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination. Sadly, they are not accepted without qualification by the churches - or by the non-Christian religions. Some churchmen indeed express serious doubts about human rights: for example, the Pope recently criticised "countries which accord great importance to pluralism and tolerance" because the result of moves towards equality and non-discrimination was that religion was "increasingly being marginalized"[8].

The origin of such doubts lies in the problem that different human rights can conflict with each other - as, for example, with some religious doctrines and the equality and rights of women and of LGBT people - and that this raises legitimate questions about whether limits on the manifestation of religion or belief may be justified, entailing some modification of

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[8]   Address to the diplomatic corps, 10 January 2011, available at http://press.catholica.va/news_services/bulletin/news/26680.php?index=26680 - accessed 6 April 2013.

the privileges the churches have traditionally enjoyed.

It is against this background that we turn to the four subjects that are the current special themes of the Religare project.