

Secularism, an essential pre-requisite for democracy

Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen,

first and foremost my heartiest thanks to the Istituto di Studi Storici Tommaso Crudeli for organising this symposium at beautiful, evocative Poppi.

I have chosen an unfortunate title for my intervention because the two main words I use – *secularism* and *democracy* – lend themselves to many different interpretations. The concepts they convey are constantly evolving along with the developments of society and acquire different connotations in different countries and languages. I decided to use the English word *secularism* to mean “separation between churches and the state” because this is indeed one of its current meanings although, interestingly enough, this definition does not appear in the English dictionaries I consulted. But this is barely surprising since the Queen, who is the head of the Church of England, is extremely popular among the British.

This meaning of *secularism* is closer to the Italian *laicità* and to the Spanish *laicidad*, whereas the French *laïcité* carries with it the idea of citizenship, non-discrimination, rejection of racism (xenophobia and homophobia). But the French have enshrined *laïcité* in their constitution almost one hundred years ago and other French-speaking countries like Belgium developed their own forms of genuine secularism, whereas we Italians have enshrined the Concordat in our constitution and are still grappling with the interference of the Catholic Church in our daily life.

A surprising but infinitely useful definition of *secularism* is that given by the Catholic church in the Note on Catholics in political life published by the Congregation for the doctrine of faith in November 2002. The Note states that the Catholic church is in favour of secularism and specifies that: “For the catholic moral doctrine, secularism in the sense of autonomy of the civil and political sphere from the religious and ecclesiastical sphere – *but not from the moral sphere* – is an accepted value” (*Italics in the original text*). Which means that the civil and political spheres have no autonomy on moral matters. Let us keep this in mind.

Although my talk refers mostly to Italy, and although concordats differ widely in their contents and scope, let me remind you that 10 out of the 15 present members of the EU have either a state religion or a concordat with the Catholic church and that the latter has recently signed a concordat with most of the central and eastern European states joining the EU next spring.

Considering that the primary aim of concordats is to bestow unending privileges, as well as conspicuous sums of money, to the Catholic church, it is safe to say that their mere existence violates one of the tenets of democracy, i.e. the principle of equality of citizens. Whoever belongs to a religion other than the official one or who is free from all religions – generally indicated with some negative prefix such as non-believer, atheist, agnostic, etc. – is discriminated and although this has not created major social problems until now, there is a growing awareness of the threat to social cohesion such discriminations may constitute in a not too distant future. History teaches us that unfair and unequal treatments which may be tolerated for years or even centuries become intolerable and create social unrest as the values of society change.

One of the major danger which derives from privileged church-state relations is the image of the Catholic church as a moral authority, or rather as *the* moral authority. I do not think this audience needs to be reminded of the conflicts and wars which monotheistic religions have been responsible for in history and still are nowadays, nor of the too few repentances of the Pope for the wrongdoings of his church. After all, we are here to commemorate Tommaso Crudeli tortured to death by the Holy Inquisition because of his freethinking. The issue for people like us who cherish justice, equality and social cohesion is not whether the Catholic church has moral authority or not. Let us leave this to its followers to decide. The issue for us is to keep our democracies clear from any outside interference whose effect is to de-legitimise our parliaments and undermine our democratic system. In Italy, with a very few laudable exceptions, our elected representatives pay lip-service to secularism while accepting and even requesting church interference on moral issues, which is akin to admitting their own shortcomings. This is what we have to denounce and fight against, this is where secularism, even in its narrowest meaning, comes in as an essential pre-requisite for democracy.

This is all the more necessary in present circumstances since church-goers have reached a record low and the very large majority of citizens choose their life-style in matters such as contraception, abortion, euthanasia, stem-cell research according to their own personal views, irrespective of church precepts.

However, this being said, we have to reckon that to-day men and women of all origins and backgrounds, practically all over the world, rediscover religion as a major component of their identity whereas until a few decades ago there used to be no pride or sense of identity attached to religious belonging. What happened in the last decades that can help us account for this change?

I am aware that developments which occur in our life-time are difficult to assess but let me just recall two events that may help us understand why the matter of identity is now so popular. The first one is globalisation that has speeded up the pace of change, deepened the crisis of our affluent

societies and damaged the social tissue that held people together. Nowadays more and more people feel alone, insecure and threatened by precarious living and working conditions, by terrorism, by “humanitarian” and “preventive” wars, by the slow but constant erosion of the human rights that are at the basis of our democracies.

Another major event that may have changed our horizons has been the decline and implosion of the communist world, the failure to build a society of equals where the idea of god would no more exist. This has probably contributed – both in the East and in the West – to the rehabilitation of the religions which fought “atheist marxism”. I sometimes think that religions as well as capitalism have been the winners of the confrontation of the “short twentieth century”.

In this context, the offer of an identity, of a sense of belonging is reassuring and is accepted gladly by the many who find relief in the values and symbols of traditions. The Catholic church is aware of that and spares no effort to assert its Christian identity wherever possible. The Vatican, through the European Bishops’ Conference strenuously insists on having the “Christian heritage” mentioned in the preamble of the European constitution and the Pope himself intervened on this matter on more than one occasion. This request has been hitherto rejected but not the recognition of the “identity” and the “specific contribution” of the churches or their wish to entertain a “regular dialogue” with the European institutions. These issues appear in article 51 of the final draft of the constitutional treaty and whether or not it will be adopted still remains to be seen. The full meaning of these requests which open the door for church interference in the democratic process of future united Europe emerges clearly from the definition of secularism given above.

In Italy, thanks to the media where the presence of the Catholic church is pervasive, the subject of “our Catholic identity” comes up regularly. Few realise that identity is a dangerous word, a double-edged knife. It may indeed give comfort to people who need to feel reassured, but it is a divisive and exclusive exercise as it draws a line between *us* and *them* and needless to say *us* are always better. Moreover, this narrows down the multiple facets or identities which make up an individual into one single factor which means dwarfing people into stereotypes which they are not. Inevitably this leads to the conclusion that all of the *thems* are similar to each other, hence all muslims are terrorists and all albanians are prostitutes or drug traffickers.

In the last couple of decades migrants from the South of the Mediterranean as well as from central and eastern Europe and from faraway Asia and Africa have come in ever larger numbers to the EU. Whether their presence among us will be an opportunity for both parties to exchange their culture and enrich one another or whether they will feel rejected and “always on the wrong side”, depends on the culture of the host country and on how secular it is. If our mind-set is narrow, exclusive, bigot, if it makes no difference between traditions that are respectable and traditions that

are hateful because they do not respect the dignity of each and every human being, then difficult times are in store for us. Conversely, if our mind-set is open and pluralist, if we reach out to immigrants with a genuine interest in their culture and diversity, we shall allay their fears and prepare for a fruitful exchange. If our concept of identity is a secular one we shall recognise that each one of us is made up of a plurality of identities and that the only European identity that can guarantee a peaceful future for our children and grand-children is the sum of all existing identities.

Ladies and gentlemen, the first point I tried to make is that privileged church-state relations lead unavoidably to social injustice. The second that they undermine democracy. The third that it is through the concept of identity that the Catholic church kindles exclusion and discrimination.

Democracy is a never-ending process and to-day one of the aspects that needs most urgently to be redefined and strictly implemented is that of church-state relations.

As you can expect, my conclusion is that secularism is the only institutional system capable of guaranteeing freedom and equality of all the religions as well as freedom from religion, thus averting the danger of unrest and conflict.

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