

Reflection Group on the “Spiritual and Cultural Dimension of Europe”

Third meeting in Brussels on the 21st of May: “The role of religion in European integration”

Summary of the meeting:

Group chairman Krzysztof Michalski introduced the main topic for discussion - the role of religions in the integration of the enlarged Europe. He pointed out the paradox – and challenge - underlying the topic, since religions were traditionally regarded as exclusive and therefore divisive cultural entities. The intellectual background for the discussion was provided by the three invited experts, sociologists of religion: David Martin, Danièle Hervieu-Léger and Nilüfer Göle.

David Martin questioned two common views, concerning the problem of religion in Europe. Firstly, he argued, even though many religious ideas have been transformed into secular principles underlying the political and social organisation of European states, religion itself is an irreducible phenomenon that has its own language and experiential structure. Secondly, the European plurality of religions is not coupled by one universalistic Enlightenment tradition, but by a plurality of rivalling secular universalisms. Professor Martin sketched an empirical map of contemporary European religiosity, pointing out the main differences between religions and the varying forms of the interplay between the religious and the secular.

Danièle Hervieu-Léger described two main processes in today’s European religiosity: religious homogenisation through secularisation and the expansion of non-institutional, subjective forms of religiosity. She also pointed out the existence of a variety of religious cultures in Europe, which have lost explicit reference to religious belief they had been shaped by but survived in the form of socio-political ideas and institutions varying across Europe. This matrix of religious civilisations is now undergoing a process of disintegration, she argued, due to a variety of cultural forces. Professor Hervieu-Léger discussed the role that a reference to religious heritage might play in the formation of the new European social bond. In her view this cannot consist in drawing upon common cultural resources, since European religious history is a history of conflict, rather than integration. It should be an active process of construction of a common memory and the production of shared values. This endeavour would entail two major risks, however, as it might be used by religious institutions for colonising public space on the one hand, and bring local religious ethnic forces into play, on the other.

Nilüfer Göle focussed on the place of Islam in European integration and the perspective of Turkish accession to the EU. She outlined a transformation of contemporary Islam that has significantly increased its presence in the European public sphere. Contemporary Islamism is no longer limited to a particular doctrine, institution or locality; it has become socially mobile and publicly visible. Muslims participating in modern public areas have a twofold sense of belonging and their

religion – as in the example of the head-scarf issue – provides them with a sense of a higher identity and social distinctness. The presence of Islam in Europe, professor Göle argued, calls for a redefinition of European public space, since the traditional boundary between the public and the private, of inclusion and exclusion, is no longer valid.

Romano Prodi argued that the main challenge is to find a way of reconciling a respect for religion with religious tolerance. He stressed the need for institutions which would embody a respect for religious variety and put an end to religious conflict. In a multicultural world, he argued, individual human rights may need to be complemented by rights granted to communities and groups, having their specific cultural identities. President Prodi stressed the need for a dialogue with religious authorities and for acknowledging the contribution of religions in the shaping of European culture. The initial statements provided the reflection group members with an ambitious task, defined by President Prodi, and a problematic empirical background outlined by the experts. The main question that emerged from the introductory remarks was how to ensure cultural unity against a growing religious diversity.

Silvio Ferrari highlighted the problem from an institutional perspective. He pointed out three main common principles underlying the differing views of the relation between Church and state in various European countries: religious freedom, the autonomy of religious institutions and the co-operation between religious and state institutions. These principles, he argued, can constitute a common European framework within which each state can find concrete solutions according to its own tradition and historical experience. He was joined by Bronisław Geremek, who argued that the European Constitution should state these principles in very general terms, as they will receive specific interpretation in the context of emerging, practical problems.

The main concern for Alberto Quadrio Curzio was to show that the Christian cultural heritage is a common heritage for Europeans - Christians and non-Christians alike. He illustrated his thesis, quoting statements by three great Europeans – Pope John Paul II, Marc Bloch and Luigi Einaudi - who, in spite of the differences between their religious identities and intellectual profiles, all shared a belief in the tremendous role Christianity has played in the shaping of the spiritual dimension of Europe. Professor Quadrio Curzio, followed by Bronisław Geremek, argued that the elimination of Christian heritage from the debate on European identity would deeply impoverish our understanding of our roots and common destiny. Professor Geremek pointed out two major facts with regard to this issue. Historically, on the one hand, Europe has been shaped by one religion; nowadays, however, it is constituted by a variety of religions. In professor Geremek's view one needs to do justice to both facts, in such a way, though, as to avoid religious conflict. This can be achieved through a retelling of European history that would highlight its constitutive dialectic between the Christian and the Enlightenment traditions, with a particular emphasis on the anthropocentric

attitude central to both. It is this dialectic anthropocentric heritage that can empower us in the face of a growing challenge of multiculturalism.

Aila Lauha emphasised the role past experience plays in the shaping of the present, with reference to an EU-sponsored project she coordinates on "Churches and European integration". Professor Lauha argued that a study of the political and social role of the Churches in the Cold War period can deepen our understanding of the opportunities and threats resulting from the Churches' participation in the public realm. Ioannis Petrou set limits upon this participation, arguing that religions can be active in public life only on condition that they respect its constitutive, secular principles, like that of religious freedom. Religion, he argued, is a private (voluntary) and social (collective) phenomenon, and should therefore be strictly separated from politics. The Churches' contribution in the field of voluntary assistance should be judged under the same criteria as all the other secular initiatives in this field. David Martin outlined three ways in which the Churches can become actors in the public sphere: they can mobilise political parties, act as pressure groups or draw on their resources in order to make a contribution to the solving of social problems. He emphasised the importance of the Churches' involvement in voluntary assistance initiatives, which allows them to reproduce themselves and contributes to pluralism in this important sphere of social solidarity.

Kurt Biedenkopf referred to Nilüfer Göle's idea of a new societal sphere that would cut across the traditional boundary between the private and the public, allowing not for integration but for the co-existence of various religious denominations in such a way that their particular identities are preserved. Europe, he argued, has lost the two main integrative forces which were so successful in the past: a common threat from the East and a shared memory of the atrocities of war. The major integrative force of today ought to be a common purpose, a mobilising of the richness of European cultural heritage – religious and secular – to solve problems we have to face both home and abroad. Europe's involvement in the world, however, should assume the form of service and not of a patronising mission. The intersection of a common political purpose and of the coexistence of religions in the societal sphere may bring about a new, redefined European public sphere, strong enough to live up to the challenge of a growing European multiculturalism. Danièle Hervieu-Léger pointed out that the need for a peaceful co-existence of religious groups is nowadays paired by the eruption of individuals' claims for the recognition of their subjective religious beliefs. What Europe therefore needs is, paradoxically, not a lowest common denominator between religious groups but an inclusive, universalistic principle to govern the religious sphere.