

**Speaking notes for Romano Prodi,
President of the European Commission**

at the third meeting of the **Reflection Group on the
Spiritual and Cultural Dimension of Europe**
Brussels, 21 May 2003

on

The role of religion in European integration

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- I wish to thank all the members of the Group and the experts present today for their excellent contributions, which I have looked at. Unfortunately I can only be with you at the start today, owing to a number of engagements that have come up. But I want to share a few thoughts with you before I leave you to get on with the discussion. And I will be seeing you again later at the Nat Neujean exhibition.

- Today the Group is tackling a topic that is both highly sensitive and very important: Europe's relationship with religion.
- **The topic is highly sensitive** because it covers subjects that are not easy to analyse:
 - the role of the authorities in today's Europe,
 - the contacts -- and unfortunately also the confrontation -- between identities within Europe's societies,
 - the issue of tolerance and respect for religion.

- **The topic is very important** because the political construction of Europe

- cannot ignore the issue of the relationship with religion,
 - because Europe has an historic opportunity to put an end to age-old conflicts -- between clericalists and anticlericalists -- and move on to a new stage.
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- In this post-modern age we live in, we must propose a bold new social and political pact to Europe's citizens. We must ask ourselves what model and what concept of mankind and society should guide the new political Europe we seek to build.
 - Religion -- like the languages we use and our different cultures and traditions -- is a basic factor that must be taken into account when tackling the new challenges of multiculturalism.
 - In Europe we have sought to set a lowest common denominator in our vision of what is good. We have done this by attributing a universal value to human rights. In societies where there is increasing internal diversity and in those societies' relations with non-European societies "outside", that universality is up for discussion.
 - Think, for example, of the different approaches -- even within Europe -- to issues such as the pro-

life versus pro-abortion debate, cloning for therapeutic or reproductive purposes and the commercialisation of stem-cell lines. Think of the protracted discussions we often engage in internationally on our conception of human rights.

- Religion plays a part in these debates too, and they are often quite heated. But we cannot approach it with a “community”-type logic, that tends to put things in relative -- rather than absolute -- terms, or with the traditional logic of liberalism, because this is no longer enough to meet concerns and fears regarding one’s own identity in the era of globalisation.
- Perhaps, then, we should start by recognising and protecting rights linked to communities and social groups? I believe it is important to consider this point. There is in any case a growing need to recognise certain situations -- individual and collective.
- Can a response to these needs be found within the European political area? Given our increasingly multicultural societies, can Europe provide the feeling of security and belonging that in turn brings openness and solidarity towards other members of the political community?

- Against that background, is *religious tolerance* enough? Or is it too limited a concept to achieve our objectives? And if that were so, how can we encourage *respect for religion*? The challenge is anything but simple, particularly when tolerance is waning in Europe's societies. And with enlargement, Europe's religious dimension is extending to embrace new components, the Christian Orthodox and Muslim.
- As regards the more specific issue of relations between the authorities and religious communities, I am convinced the Union must respect the provisions of national law (see Article 37 of the draft European Constitution) and it must keep up a constant dialogue with them.
- For the rest, I would stress that the Commission has already taken practical steps to meet that need for dialogue through our White Paper on European Governance and the implementing document, which provides for regular consultations with religious communities when legislation concerning them is drafted and tabled.
- Lastly, I wish to underline what I have said on various occasions regarding a reference to religious and ethical values in the European Constitution.

- Acknowledging the contribution of fundamental values is beneficial to all -- believers and non-believers. It does not imply we are calling into question the Union's secular character or the separation between the State and religion.
- As we build the new, enlarged Europe, we cannot marginalise religions and the movements that have played a part in European integration and Europe's cultural development and that are showing renewed interest and desire for dialogue with the Union's institutions.
- Acknowledging this heritage does not send a message of rejection or exclusion. Europe's true strength lies in its capacity to mix and blend vastly different influences and cultures. How can we leave Christianity, Judaism and Islam out of the picture in the open, pluralist Europe we want to build?