

How the churches intend to increase their influence in the EU

When the Treaty of Lisbon was signed, it brought into effect a clause that gives special consultation rights to religious organisations. It is something the Vatican has been trying to achieve for decades. Now that Article 17 is in place, it commits the EU to holding “an open, transparent and regular dialogue with... churches and (non-confessional and philosophical) organisations”.

In fact, these consultations had been taking place long before the Treaty was ratified. But, this month, more than two dozen Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders — joined by a representative each from the Hindu and Sikh communities (a development that did not please the Catholic Church) — met the presidents of the European Parliament, European Commission and European Council.



But opponents of the Article say that because many Europeans are secular, and an increasing number practise non-Christian religions, churches should not have special rights. Jean de Brueker, deputy secretary general of the European Humanist Federation, which advocates more secularism in Europe said: “Leaders need to respect the separation between church and state”. De Brueker’s organisation, to which the NSS is affiliated, says separate consultation agreements should be limited to elected officials and those with recognised special expertise.

Herman Van Rompuy, president of the European Council, said the EU was a secular organisation but spoke about the “moral significance” of the 27-country bloc, hinting at the need for spiritual and religious input. He told reporters: “The European Union has to be a union of values. That is our added value in the world. That is the soft power of Europe in the world”.

Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz of Poland, who spent decades in the Vatican as private secretary to Pope John Paul II was, of course, over the moon about Article 17. “I believe there is a need for such consultations with churches so as not to make mistakes on moral or ethical issues, for the benefit of societies,” Dziwisz told Reuters in December, displaying the arrogance and complacency for which he is famous. “Let’s not forget that religion is also a great force that creates cultures and societies. It cannot be bypassed.”

European Parliament President Jerzy Buzek has announced that the European Parliament will meet Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox leaders on 30 September to discuss how to implement Article 17.

One way or another, debate over what role the Church, and by extension churches, can play in engaging with the European Union is only likely to intensify. The EU’s hopes of ‘reaching out’ to religious communities may very well end up drawing it deeper into a complex, centuries-old debate.

And the campaigns for religious influence have already started. MEP Martin Kastler of Bavaria wants to see a Europe-wide law prohibiting shops and businesses from opening on Sundays. He is trying to use a new right from the EU that says any citizen can introduce legislation if they can collect one million supporting signatures from across nine EU countries within a year.

“For me, Sunday is a family day,” said Mr. Kastler, and like many Christians, he thinks his beliefs should be enforced by law.

Article 17 also calls for dialogue with “non-confessional and philosophical organisations” and after pressure from Brussels, the EU is to hold a summit with atheists and freemasons on 15 October, inviting them to a political dialogue which is supposed to parallel the religious summit.

David Pollock, president of the European Humanist Federation, told *EUobserver* that he was dismayed at the inclusion of freemasons with humanists, secularists and atheists, saying “I find it rather odd. ... Some of the Grand Lodges are secularist organisations, and strongly for separation of church and state, but they also retain all sorts of gobbledygook and myths such as the Great Architect of the Universe. Their public face is that they do charitable work and they do indeed engage in this, but there are also rituals involving blindfolded candidates with their trouser-legs rolled up during initiation.”

The EHF, along with the NSS and many other secular organisations, fought hard for the “religion clause” to be deleted from the Lisbon Treaty, arguing that no-one has the right to special treatment – not even the churches.

"Neither religious groups nor non-religious ones have any greater claim to taking up the time of commissioners," said Mr Pollock. "But, sadly, we lost that battle, and so with the atheist summit, at least we're being treated equally, although I'd rather if we were there along with the churches. Instead we're being bundled off with the Freemasons."

Keith Porteous Wood, NSS Executive Director, commented: "The apparent level playing field created by ostensibly reciprocal religious and non-religious elements of Article 17 is illusory. The religious are hierarchical, wealthy and well established in the corridors of power – an arm of the Catholic Church even has its own diplomatic corps and a seat at the UN. Article 17 helps the religious to hold on to the immense power they already have and even expand it. Indeed, the churches' ambitions to exploit Article 17 go far beyond an occasional meeting in Brussels. They hope that it will eventually give them privileged access to other EU agencies, notably the Fundamental Rights Agency, as well as with the bloc's new diplomatic corps, the External Action Service.

"By contrast, the non-religious by their very nature are heterogeneous and non-hierarchical – and as a consequence, poorly funded. They have practically no power or vested interests to protect, so Article 17 brings them very little. The net effect of Article 17 is to substantially increase the religious hegemony in European politics at the very time religious observance in Europe is in its steepest decline."

This power is graphically illustrated in an excellent new DVD entitled *In Defence of Secularism* that has been launched by the Centre d'Action Laïque in Belgium. It explores the depth of penetration in European Institutions that the Churches have achieved, threatening secularism and church-state-separation throughout the EU.

The film shows how the churches are building a strategy to influence political decisions and promote their views. Among many examples, they chose to focus on three countries: Romania, Ireland and Italy. Those examples invite and incite the defenders of secularism to remain alert.

NSS members can obtain a copy of the DVD free of charge by sending a stamped (51p minimum) and addressed padded envelope to NSS DVD Offer, 25 Red Lion Square, London, WC1R 4RL. This offer is open to members only.

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