

Fearghas O'Beara: The European Union and Religion

The Supranational Meets the Supernatural

Foreword by Ján Figel'

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During my time in national and EU politics, I have often met the perception that the European Union is, at best, disinterested in religion or, for some, even working against Europe's Christian heritage and values. My experience of public service to the European project has led me to a different conclusion.

From its beginnings as a peace and reconciliation project after World War II and the Shoah, European integration was always about much more than economic cooperation. It sought to create a community of nations and of peoples and had human dignity at its heart. This is abundantly clear in the vision of founders such as Robert Schuman, Konrad Adenauer, or Alcide de Gasperi. In the Eastern part of the continent, during the years 1989 and 1991, Christian dissent and resistance led to velvet, spiritual, non-violent collapse of communist regimes and, ultimately, the whole bloc which had been dominated by the militant atheism of the former Soviet Union.

If it is true that while religion became gradually less visible in European society over the second half of the 20th century, this was not the experience of the rest of the world. But some EU authorities started to wake up to this reality and realise that there was a great need to understand the place religion plays in the lives of the great majority of people across the globe. When I was appointed by the President of the European Commission as the first Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the EU in May 2016, the Union was already stepping up its engagement with churches, religious and non-confessional communities, both inside the Union, and in third countries.

Through my work there, I could see that religious freedom is a very important and good starting point for such engagement. It is a fundamental right that goes to the core of human identity, dignity and wellbeing, and is a litmus test for all other human rights. It is the freedom decisive for all – believers and non-believers. There is a deep and strong nexus between freedom of religion or belief and human dignity, defined by the EU Treaties as the first among EU fundamental values. International and European law understands this freedom as freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This way we recognize and respect indivisible, triune dimensions of each person – human rationality, morality and spirituality (religiosity). If these essential and deepest freedoms (*forum internum*) are not respected by state or society then subsequent freedoms (*forum externum*) like freedom of opinion, media, association, assembly are violated or oppressed as well.

Many European countries have a colonial past which should lead them to be humble as they approach other cultures in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, or Latin America. Very often these are cultures where religion plays a central role in social, or even political life. We need to understand this, and embrace it, if we want to achieve a truly ‘Global Europe’ – one that is rooted in our shared values, respectful of other traditions, and with human dignity as its lodestar.

The world and human history are overwhelmingly religious. Those who do not understand religion, and especially the abuse of religion, cannot truly understand what is going on in the world. And when we do not understand, how can we properly heal or help? The EU should learn that a strong commitment to promoting and defending religious liberty is key to a whole range of other foreign and security policy objectives. Certainly, the EU Member States and Institutions should do more and strengthen their commitment towards religious communities as partners in actions related to development and humanitarian assistance, reconciliation, peace building and post-conflict resolution, or women’s rights and local empowerment.

Back in 2008, as European Commissioner for Education and Culture, I was responsible for designing and implementing the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. In a dialogue 1 + 1 is more than two, because dialogue is not a formula of mathematics, but act of ethics. Yields of dialogue are shared knowledge, better understanding, added value, synergy, common word. Fair, open and constructive dialogue leads diverse communities from common ground to common vision, and through common action to common future. I believe there is still much untapped potential from those activities. The EU should encourage cooperation among human rights defenders, faith-based organisations and religious actors, and support interreligious dialogue, as instruments to combat intolerance and discrimination and advance human dignity and rights of all.

During my years in the European Commission, I used to meet and work with Fearghas O’Beara. While being grateful for the positive actions and mutual support, I highly appreciate his steady engagement with the European integration process and with the highly meaningful, non-material agenda of the Schuman Plan and legacy. This book is very professional and the valued fruit of his research, experience and conviction.

Freedom of religion or belief is important right of individuals and communities worldwide. And religious social responsibility is the other side of the same value coin. In today’s fragmented world and times of bloody wars and multiple conflicts, positive contribution of religious leaders and communities to culture of dialogue, reconciliation and respect to others is highly important. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights invites us all to act “in the spirit of brotherhood”. Sharing this spirit in current generations is therefore our shared responsibility. Freedom and responsibility go hand in hand, like our rights and duties. They are interdependent, and stem equally from inviolable dignity of human person and human community. We are all invited to embrace this noble endowment and commitment.

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