

# Buttiglione and the spectre of secularism in the EU

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One hundred and fifty six years ago Karl Marx and Frederick Engels wrote in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*: "A spectre is haunting Europe — the spectre of communism." Today, the "spectre" that is haunting Europe could be called the spectre of secularism.

There are Christians, and there are Christian fundamentalists, there are Jews, and there are militant Zionists. And of course, there are Muslims, and there are militant Islamists. Similarly, there are not only tolerant non-religious liberals (atheists or agnostics) but there is also a fundamentalist, intolerant and militant version of them, a kind of negative religionists that I (and others) call *secularists*. A contemporary Christian or Jew, and perhaps also Muslim, can politically and culturally coexist with the former, even if they gain dominance and power, but — as the Buttiglione case shows — not so easily with the latter.

Rocco Buttiglione, a lawyer and administrative Judge, was the main reason why the EU President designate J. M. Barroso had to withdraw his twenty five candidates for the EU Commission (Buttiglione was to be the EU Commissioner for Justice, Freedom and Security), before it was voted on in the European Parliament. It became clear, that the Socialists, Liberals, Greens and other leftists, who together formed a majority, would vote against Barroso's team. Buttiglione, a committed Catholic and a close friend of the Pope, was unacceptable to the secularists mainly because of his allegedly anti-gay statements, which were, however, seldom quoted by the opinion-forming media. What Buttiglione actually said, when interviewed in October, was this:

I may think that homosexuality is a sin but this has no effect on politics, unless I say that homosexuality is a crime. The state has no right to stick its nose into these things, and nobody can be discriminated against on the basis of sexual orientation... this stands in the Charter of Human Rights, this stands in the Constitution, and I have pledged to defend this constitution.

And this is the point, where the intolerance of the new secularists becomes so frightening and reminding one of Orwell's thought police. A loyal Catholic will also think that many other things are a sin (extra-marital sex, use of contraceptives, non-attendance of Sunday masses, etc.) but surely that does not mean that a Minister of Justice or even a judge, who happens to be a Catholic, would discriminate against those who transgress these Catholic norms. As long as they are *sins* (anyhow, a concept meaningless to a non-religious) and *not crimes* defined by the written law as well as common, secular, moral norms. The "old" European secularists rightly object to religious societies (e.g. Islamic, or medieval Christian) where this distinction is not being made, but they themselves do not want to recognise this distinction — made so explicitly by Buttiglione — between adherence to law and personal opinions or rules of conduct that follow

some authority acceptable or unacceptable to the secularist, politically correct code.<sup>1</sup> Some fifty years ago even the most ardent atheist did not think he would be discriminated against, because he e.g. ate meat on Friday, just because the Minister of Justice happened to be a loyal Catholic! Well, in those times political correctness was an unknown phrase, and old-time atheists, being a minority, were more tolerant.

But you do not have to be a Catholic to see the point. Nick Spencer, speaking from the position of a 'liberal democrat' says essentially the same thing:

Buttiglione's hounding from office brings to light one of the most distasteful and worrying trends of our time. It shows how moral conservatives are increasingly debarred from office, even when they agree to leave their convictions at the door. And it demonstrates how, in bowing their knee at the altar of 'tolerance', elements of the liberal left are prepared to adopt aggressively intolerant measures, to turn their own tolerance into a kind of dictatorial 'totaltolerance'. Most worryingly, it marks the eclipse of the liberal vision that has been the guiding light of progressive politics since the days of John Stuart Mill. Buttiglione's insistence that the personal and political can coexist while being at odds is the cornerstone of liberal democracy. The alternative is for the thought police to patrol our personal opinions, to ensure they conform to the political norms of the day.

<http://www.liicc.org.uk/culture/the-excommunication-of-Rocco-Buttiglione>

On this website one can find an interesting discussion of the influence of personal beliefs on the ability of a Minister of Justice to properly carry out his/her duties. Of course, there will always be an influence, and of course, there are many topics, including homosexuality, on which prospective candidates can hold a variety of personal moral beliefs. Any such belief will somehow influence the way he/she approaches his/her public duty and interprets the law where it is open to interpretation. Including the beliefs apparently held by Buttiglione, as well as those diametrically opposed to them, apparently preferred by the politically correct majority in the EU parliament. The question to ask is: Why is the Catholic point of view considered so unacceptable that it would debar Buttiglione from public office, rather than being seen as one of many equally tolerated personal beliefs representing the various moral/cultural backgrounds of Europeans?

<sup>1</sup> I was brought up a Catholic but the "holier than thou" attitude and form (not content) of some of the apologists irritated me. Today, reading e. g. DER SPIEGEL (there is now a daily English summary available for free on <http://service.spiegel.de/cache/international/0,1518,324167,00.html>) I have the same unsavoury aftertaste because of the self-righteous form in which they present their secularist views (not so much the contents though, of course, I mostly reject it).

However, one contribution on this website demands clarification:

Mr Buttiglione may state that his own beliefs would have no bearing on the way he carried out his duty but he has past 'form' in doing exactly that. When he was the Italian Europe Minister in 2001 he called for the banning of artificial insemination. Then when serving on the committee writing up the Constitution, he opposed the clauses that would have enshrined the principle of non-discrimination on the basis of sexuality.

Why is it a secularist 'sin' to "call for banning of artificial insemination" and why is it not a 'sin' e.g. to call for the legalisation of homosexual marriages? Very few people would support the first call (and I am somehow suspicious that also Buttiglione is quoted here out of context), and the second call is certainly controversial to say the least. But this is beside the point. Everybody, including those in positions of power, have the right to call for something as long as they respect the law, and accept the decision of the majority (or of those holding legitimate authority). The second accusation is more peculiar. Why should the Constitution contain clauses against discrimination "on basis of sexuality", and not, say, on basis of health, age, ethnicity, beliefs, education, body weight etc.? The list could go on and on. I am not sure how Buttiglione formulated his position regarding the Constitution, but in the quoted interview he said very clearly that "nobody can be discriminated against on the basis of sexual orientation" but he adds that (my translation, I have only the German version on hand):

The rights of the homosexuals should be defended from the same basis as the rights of all other European citizens. If there are specific problems relating to homosexuals I am ready to take these into account. ... But I would not accept that homosexuals are a special category, and that the defence of their rights should rest on a basis that is different from that available to all European citizens as such. ... I consider it inappropriate to assume that all people must agree in all matters of morals. We can build a community of citizens even if we have different opinions about certain moral issues.

Is it so important for the European Constitution to contain a reference to homosexuality but not to Christianity or even God? And if so, what is this indicative of? Besides, what is discrimination? Is a blind person discriminated against if he/she is not allowed to drive a car? Is a homosexual couple discriminated against if their union is not regarded by law as being equivalent (as regards child rearing) to the marriage of a man and a woman? (Buttiglione remarks, that the very word matrimony, is related to the Latin *Mater* and originally meant 'Protection of mother').<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, there is absolutely no sexual discrimination for people called to celibate service, notably Catholic priests: celibacy means the same hardship, whatever the person's "orientation"!

The Buttiglione controversy might have parallels with John F. Kerry's. Politically, both are losers and both for seemingly the same reason: separation of personal beliefs from political commitment to their prospective constituents. It is true, that Buttiglione was punished for his distinction by the secularist majority in the EU parliament, while Kerry was punished by those supporting Bush's alleged religious conservatism, including some Catholic bishops. It is also true, that in Buttiglione's case the bone of contention was homosexuality, while Kerry's controversy revolved mainly around abortion on demand. And that is the big difference. Buttiglione (and the Catholic Church) regards homosexual activity a sin but not a crime that should be punishable by law. On the other hand, the Catholic position on abortion on demand is, that it is murder. (Like many pacifists, who consider any killing in war that is not personal self-defence, a murder.) And murder is not just a sin, it is a crime recognised as such by everybody, including the secularists. I am not going to defend here the Catholic position; I just wanted to point out the difference.<sup>3</sup>

The Buttiglione affair not only points to an ideological intolerance, surpassed in Europe's recent history only by the Nazis and communists, it comes also hand in hand with something that unveils our secularists' non-European, even anti-European, prejudices and orientation: the recent omission from the Constitution of the EU of any reference to Christianity, even God (common to Muslims and Jews as well). A cultural self-denial, a rejection of one's own roots because they are buried in a past incomprehensible to the pompous secularists. Just recently I stood in the Aachen Cathedral next to the throne, where Charlemagne (742-814) — generally considered the 'founding father' of a united Europe — sat. Until the middle of last century, (the times of Adenauer and de Gaule), this was an idea of a united Europe based on Christian values, not their 'plastic replicas' advocated by the new secularists of present day "old" Europe. Indeed, those who want to expunge Christian roots from Europe's heritage and cultural make-up because of the pre-scientific "Dark Ages", should take note of Alfred Whitehead's observation that "the faith in the possibility of science, generated antecedently to the development of modern scientific theory, is an unconscious derivative from medieval theology." In other words, no enlightened modernity (which introduced also the concept of tolerance) without the Christian Middle Ages that gave birth to it. One may add that this was a painful birth, as births usually are. And that it is the mother, not the offspring, who suffers.

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<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless: I have no memory of myself when I was either plus or minus six months old: I would not remember my mother wanting to kill me (but then changing her mind) in either of the cases. However, I certainly would, had she told me about such intentions when I was, say, six years old. Why then should it be a crime to kill such an un-self-conscious being when it is plus six months old, but not a crime to kill it when it is minus six months old?