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European Charter of Fundamental Rights approved *French bishop criticizes suppression of reference to religious heritage*

ZENIT.org (16.10.2000)/ HRWF International Secretariat (17.10.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The European Union's Charter of Fundamental Rights was approved by the 15 member countries. But whether it will be binding is yet to be decided.

The European leaders, who voted here Saturday, left the question about its juridical status for a later time. The charter could remain a simple declaration of principles, as Great Britain proposed. Its promoters say the charter should be a kind of embryo of a European Constitution. It will embrace the personal, political and social rights of EU citizens. The charter will be proclaimed at the next summit, Dec. 7, in Nice.

The decision to eliminate the reference to religious heritage from the preamble was criticized by French Bishop Hippolyte Simon of Clermont-Ferrand.

In an article in Saturday's Le Monde newspaper, entitled "Why Deny Europe's Religious Heritage?," Bishop Simon criticizes the decision to delete the reference to the religious heritage, which has been substituted by the phrase "moral and spiritual patrimony."

The modification was made at the suggestion of French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, who emphasized the secular character of the French Republic.

Bishop Simon contends that is a mistake. "What argument will the state of law have in asking believers to respect it, if it is precisely the state that ignores them?" the bishop asked.

Article 1 of the charter recognizes that "Human dignity is inviolable. It must be respected and protected." It is also firmly opposed to capital punishment. Article 3 addresses comprehensively questions related to bioethics, and prohibits "eugenic practices, in particular, those whose objective is the selection of persons," as well as "the reproductive cloning of human beings."

In its final form, Article 10 recognizes the right to religious liberty with these words: "Every person has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion." However, the document does not make allowance for the communal dimension of faith. Article 22 addresses the issue thus: "The Union respects cultural, religious and linguistic diversity."

The section on the family is brief but open to broad interpretation.

Article 9 guarantees "the right to contract marriage and the right to found a family according to the national laws that regulate its exercise. Article 24, dedicated to minors, recognizes that all children have the right "periodically, to maintain personal relations and direct contacts with their father, and mother, except if these are contrary to the children's interests."

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No More Dangerous Than the Dalai-Lama Himself ?

Experts plead for a more accurate perception of cults

By Andre Pratte

LA PRESSE (17.05.2000)/HRWF International Secretariat (07.05.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Fostered by the Media, society holds an exaggerated perception of cults, unanimously considered as manipulators, deceitful, and potentially deadly. However, many experts on this issue maintain that the majority of these groups are no more dangerous than the Dalai-Lama himself.

" If there exists a dictatorship, it is the one of the Dalai-Lama! He is the one announcing where he will come to life again! The deviations of Mother Teresa and the Dalai-Lama are never spoken of but the ones from cults are always stigmatized!" noted sociologist Alain Bouchard during a colloquium on cults held at the University of Montreal sponsored by the French-Canadian Association for the Advancements of Sciences (FCAAS).

"There are sectarian phenomena within the great Religions and in every group. In this case, the United States are also sectarian since Americans consider that there are only two groups: them and the rest of the world" added theologian and psychoanalyst, Pierre Pelletier.

These experts do not deny the fact that some of these cults have experienced important drifts that have resulted in tens and, in some cases, hundreds of victims. But these drifts do not necessarily bear any relation with the affiliation to one of these marginal religious groups. "The majority of cults do not experience violent drifts" states religious historian Jean-Francois Mayer, Fribourg University professor (Switzerland). Mr. Mayer has studied very closely the tragedy of the Solar Temple Order.

"We are faced with a blooming and historically unprecedented situation involving religious groups", he said during an interview with La Presse. There are hundreds of groups in each of our societies, and thousands worldwide. And out of this considerable number, the number of drifts are extremely low."

Mr. Mayer is not against the vigilance displayed by authorities nor is he surprised to see that the Media has more interest in spectacular stories instead of the rather harmless daily activities conducted by cults. He is also distressed by the fact that such attention creates a generalized fear that is not justified and as a result, members of these groups are often discriminated against.

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Ste-Foy College and Laval University sociology professor Alain Bouchard has, for a long time, studied the stereotyped images portrayed by the Media on these marginal religious groups. These images, he says, are full of prejudices: " You know this cliché: easy to get in [a cult], difficult to get out. Well, investigations made on the question reveal that only 4% of people who take the necessary steps to convert end up converting. And in average, after two to two and a half years, 75% of people leave the group. Therefore, this image of imprisonment, of naïve people being entrapped, does not correspond to reality."

The Media put too much emphasis on group suicides committed within the contexts of cults. However, Mr. Bouchard quickly emphasizes that suicides are very frequent in Quebec and that often times the motives have no relation with the religion.

If true, as recognized by these experts, that most cults are harmless and that they are not too different than the mainstream institutionalized religions, why does society has such an exaggerated image of them? Because, answers theologian Christian Saint-Germain of UQAM, the majority of people in our society does not tolerate dissidence: "This allergy to cults is, in fact, caused by society's desire to fold back into this complete Media aloofness, thus creating a highly stimulating and relaxing feeling."

Even more dangerous than cults themselves would be their extinction, maintains Mr. Saint-Germain: "This would mean that it would be totally unacceptable to freely adhere to something in the public arena."