



AIO and FoRB

A new reading of Article 17 of the TFEU in view of the current global uncertainties

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The text of Article 17 of the TFEU contains no indication, let alone any restriction whatsoever, regarding the topics that may be addressed in the dialogue between the EU and the religions and philosophical organisations entitled to take part in it. This absence of mandatory references leaves room for the greatest freedom, but at the same time exposes the choice of the dialogue's content to vagueness or, conversely, to arbitrariness, without forgetting that the dialogue as such commits the European institutions. Much depends on the goodwill and, above all, on the intention of both parties to make the best use of this statutory provision, which in any case recognises that churches and philosophical organisations play a significant role in the EU's activities of dialogue and exchange, both on matters concerning religions and churches and on those concerning European institutions and societies. Among the elements that may be the subject of the dialogue are certainly those values that the Treaty on European Union and the Preamble of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU present as the foundation on which the entire institutional edifice of the EU rests.

What makes reference to them almost obligatory, and not only for us, is the fact that the formulation of the list of those values – namely: “the universal values of the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law”, as well as “the principles of liberty, democracy and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and of the rule of law” (TEU, *Preamble*); and similarly in the *Preamble* of the TFEU, which speaks of “the indivisible, universal values of human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity”, and also of the principles “of democracy and the rule of law”, whereby the Union “places the individual at the heart of its activities, by establishing the citizenship of the Union and by creating an area of freedom, security and justice”, not to mention respect for freedom of religion – is owed to a large extent to the Christian tradition and the cultural environment from which they originate. In themselves, the fundamental principles and values of a community or a people are among those things taken for granted, naturally acquired and peacefully possessed. Current circumstances, however, belie this ordinary condition, since everything that is happening in and around our societies at this stage of our history seems to call into question even what should be considered stable and immutable. There are those who call for the revision of the Treaties on various points; one should ask whether, at least for

some, these points to be revised might not also include the values on which our common path has been founded for almost seventy years.

The fact is that the principles and values on which a shared life is founded need not only to be codified and formally accepted in order to be considered established, but must in some way be regarded and embraced as something alive by all those who share the same social and cultural belonging. The problem of our time – and not only of today – is that a shared heritage of values is in the process of dissolving. The difficulty does not arise from the phenomenon of pluralism that has long characterised our societies, since pluralism still makes it possible to find those common concerns that are proper to a cohesive society, beyond even significant differences. What is new is that it is precisely the common premises that have disappeared, owing to a series of factors that have helped to weaken social cohesion to the point of exhausting it and tending to lose it altogether.

This is precisely the delicate point: that the common ethical and cultural heritage is considered irrelevant to the conduct of an ordinary individual existence. The idea that the individual is entirely self-sufficient has penetrated so deeply into the collective mindset that we no longer pay attention to the elementary fact that only through the integration of freedom and responsibility, of rights and duties, of relationships of giving and receiving, can everything that individuals and the community as a whole need be secured. But for this to happen, a common fabric is needed, a fundamental bond that motivates relationships and everything that holds us together, so that everyone is given the possibility of a dignified existence. No one lives without relationships and without experiencing the need we have of one another.

Until now, what has ensured this motivational dimension at the personal and social level has been precisely that set of values whose primary inspiration lies in the Christian tradition, with its idea of the person and of human dignity, closely bound to the community and to society in a constitutive solidarity. One of the factors that has slowly undermined this vision, and the corresponding way of being in the world, at its roots has been the individualistic and a-religious conception of the human being, according to which religious and, more generally, ideal choices have no relevance or bearing on social coexistence, which is deemed capable of functioning by virtue of adequate regulation and the corresponding implementation of the required procedures. Reality is there to demonstrate the falsity of such an approach, which legitimises the erasure of any form of ideal, moral and religious bond in shaping a cohesive social reality. Needless to say, a culturally cohesive society does not endanger freedom and pluralism, irreversible achievements of European history; on the contrary, it makes them possible on a solid foundation.

It would be worth assessing to what extent the backward-looking tendencies of so many political and electoral movements in recent years, in the direction of populism and nationalism, are not reactions to an inexorable trend towards the dissolution of the social fabric, now regarded as at work in the cultural and political approach that the European Union, within the framework of the West as a whole, has made its own. Nor should we overlook the aggravating factor of an economic situation that is increasingly difficult for the weakest social groups and, to a growing extent, for the middle classes as well. From a more specifically European Union perspective, there are the never-dispelled reservations of large sections of

national public opinion, which perceive its institutions as a distant bureaucracy capable only of regulating and conditioning the national legislation of the Member States, and not always genuinely serving the needs of their peoples. The summary and superficial judgement often expressed in this way should not make us lose sight of the real problems of poor communication and representation that the current configuration of the EU nonetheless contains. On this point, it must be said that the churches have always felt, and still feel, that it is their particular task to foster dialogue, not only at the formal level provided for by the Treaties, but through a work of contacts and exchange that already represents a decisive contribution to the EU's journey.

The provisional conclusion is that we need to reflect on how to make use of the dialogue provided for by Article 17 of the TFEU to address these fundamental issues as well, knowing that the problem is much broader and requires the commitment and effort not only of all Christian denominations, as an event such as the one we are celebrating demonstrates, but also of all those who understand these issues and can be involved in a collective effort of reflection on, and rethinking of, the current condition of our peoples and of Europe as a whole. Much is entrusted to those who hold responsibility in the EU and to those who can help foster discussion and dialogue, and the resulting action, starting with institutional dialogue. Work in this direction can be further developed on the basis of this conference.

I conclude by observing that there are urgent matters whose pressure those in government sometimes feel to an all-consuming degree. Nevertheless, we cannot forget – governments, churches and social forces of every kind, as well as citizens – that the most important and decisive questions are the long-term ones.