

The Cross is the Logo of Europe

by Martin Kugler

In 1960, as Cardinal König of Vienna awoke from a coma after a serious car accident in former Yugoslavia; he looked at the wall of the hospital room and saw a picture of Tito. For the young archbishop this experience was the beginning of an internal process that led him to a special solidarity with the Christians in communist countries. For us the picture of this situation can help clear up a misunderstanding with which policies & politics are made today in Europe. It is the mistaken belief that real religious freedom is given if a society is free of religion, or - rather more diplomatically worded: Secularism is the proper way in which the state expresses its neutrality. This misconception, currently propagated by a judgment of the ECHR, is based on two false assumptions that, if held in a prejudice-free and reasonable discussion, could be easily disproved.

First, the talk of the value-neutral state: It is simply naive and the result of an illusion. Secondly, the assumption that a public without any presence of religious life or religious symbols would be more "tolerant" or more appropriate to freedom of conscience than a "Public Square" which permits or even encourages statements of religious belief.

The first of the two conditions of our misunderstanding is rather a joke: value-neutral state? Against fraud and corruption? Against xenophobia and discrimination? Sins against the environment and sexual harassment in the workplace? A state that bans neo-Nazis, allows pornography, favors certain forms of developmental assistance, but others not... all due to neutral values?

Someone is trying to make a fool of us! Goethe already railed against talking about the nonsense of "liberal ideas". Ideas should possibly be good or right and our attitude towards people with other ideas should be liberal. As a historian, I can only interpret this talk of a value-neutral state thusly: It is a somewhat belated over-reaction of European intellectuals against the alliance of throne and altar of the past.

The second assumption one must take seriously, however: The great Jewish legal scholar, Joseph Weiler, said (given the debate about the reference to God in the European Constitution): As a member of a religious minority, he felt better off in a society that respects its religious symbols, than he would in a secular society, which would deny its roots and even work zealously against any expression of faith. One might add: The removal of the cross in a public hospital and the resulting blank walls are a sign which carry its own symbolism and send signals to dying patients, who look out for them.

Of course, the atheist parent might feel his or her child being molested by the cross in the classroom. But this is inevitable. I may also feel annoyed when upon entering a post office I catch sight of a photograph of the Austrian Federal President whom I have not voted for. Or if I am on the way to my daughter's nursery school looking at posters of the municipality of Vienna co-financed by me. Influence, ideological signals, visual presences - also sexist - will always exist everywhere. The only question is how and containing what. The state should intervene only very moderately. And if it does, not by bans that imprison religion into a ghetto. The cross is now less than ever a sign of restraint, but one of identity and cohesion of Europe. So not only Cardinal König was missing it in the Yugoslavian hospital room. Equally would I and also friends alienated from the Church miss it: On the mountain peaks of the Swiss Alps, on the rooftops of the Burgundian churches and the ambulances cars of the Red Cross. To the Christian, the cross is claim and mystery. But for Europe it is the most successful and best logo of all times. It should remain visible.

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Please also note for further reading the Letter for Europe No 16:

"We will reap contempt" by Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the pontifical Council for Christian unity:

http://www.europe4christ.net/fileadmin/media/pdf/english/Letter_for_Europe_16.pdf