

MARTENS:"THE BUTTIGLIONE DEBATE TOUCHES ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION"



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According to Wilfried Martens, the Chairman of the Christian-Democrats in Europe, freedom of religion is essential for the society of values that the European Union wants to be. This very freedom is at the core of the present debate regarding candidate-Commissioner Buttiglione.

◆If one refuses Buttiglione the right to a personal philosophy of life then, according to this same logic, one can refuse Turkey as well. ◆

Wilfried Martens has an ideal: The European Community becoming a Union of values, where nations and citizens with different life philosophies live peacefully together. The Union is already on this path. But the commotion around the Italian candidate-Commissioner Buttiglione, the ban on the wearing of scarves in France, and the debate on the accession of Turkey, show that not everybody interprets these issues in the same way. The European Union, and also his own party, have still a lot of work to do; this said by the man who, for thirteen years, was Prime Minister of Belgium. Yet in Europe, not all of us are on the same wavelength.

Since 1990, Wilfried Martens is President of the EPP, the European People's Party of Christian Democrats. The EPP's goal is to make the EU a community of values and thus, welcomes Prime Minister Balkenende's initiation of the debate on this subject, in his capacity of President of the European Council.

◆The EPP's activities are geared to it and we are also a Party of values, a political movement of people who, out of Christian inspiration ◆ whether Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Lutheran, Anglican ◆ want to establish fundamental values within the European Union ◆.

Martens agrees that other political parties also have similar goals, notwithstanding significant differences.

◆We have, of course, within the EU the Copenhagen criteria. Every country that aspires to become part of the Union has to fulfill essential values, having a democratic constitution and adhering to human rights. But there is more: fundamental equal rights are not yet part of the criteria. Many political parties agree on the importance of freedom, responsibility and solidarity, but they all put their own perspective on each aspect. The Socialists put more emphasis on solidarity and the Liberals on freedom. We, Christian Democrats, opt for a balance between values; a sort of synthesis. Personal freedom has to be linked with society where people can take their own responsibility. Only then can one blossom to the maximum and develop into a unique human being. ◆

Scarves

He admits that, because of theoretical approaches, the Christian Democrats had always difficulty explaining it. Differing ideas on the subject emerge from the numerous ongoing discussions in Europe. Take the debates in France and in Turkey on the wearing of scarves.

◆If people want to reach the maximum development of their own unique personality, then the expression of their personal philosophy of life is, ultimately, coupled with it. If this cannot be permitted, for me it is unacceptable. But of course I understand the French tradition in this matter, where the strict division of state and church is maintained. But from the same democratic point of view, I support people that want to express their convictions on life in their own society by means of symbols ◆.

This discussion concerns the commotion around the Catholic Buttiglione who, because of his comments on homosexuality, cannot become a European Commissioner.

◆The fundamental question is, of course, if a mandated politician has the right to a personal philosophy on life. The principle of freedom of religion, an essential element of the Union, is put to question because if one refuses Buttiglione the right to a personal philosophy of life then, according to this same logic, one can refuse Turkey as well. In the logic of reproach of Buttiglione, we might begin to question the necessity of applying freedom of religion, the right to individuality and opinion. I, myself, have a different opinion on the subject and I am very tolerant towards homosexuality, because I see this as a sexual orientation determined by genetics. But the issue of homosexuality should not have occurred in the framework of whether someone is suitable to be a European Commissioner or not. In any case, I personally would not have answered the questions on this subject. What is important is the principle of non-discrimination, and as far as I am aware of, Mr. Buttiglione has never declared that he will discriminate against homosexuals. ◆

Turkey

The issue on whether different religious and life convictions can exist within the European Union is now very much in the forefront. It ◆s also present in the discussions on the accession of Turkey, which in his own party there are also differing views. The fear of many Europeans to welcome a big Islamic country into the EU has increased, now that Turkey is knocking on Europe ◆s door. The Christian Democrats in Germany have already indicated that they prefer a special partnership, not full membership. Martens as President of the EPP, is very much involved in the debate and hopes that the fear for Turkey will vanish when the country fulfills its partnership obligations.

◆Since 2001, we in the EPP have supported the idea that Turkey receives a ◆privileged partnership ◆ with the EU. The negotiations should be open-ended and should not automatically lead to full membership. Now, it also clear that the Commission sees this in the same way. ◆

To Christian Democrats and to others who are against full membership he, therefore, says that they should wait for the implementation and outcome of this ◆privileged partnership ◆.

◆ *Let us realize this on a short-term basis and when the result is positive, we should keep the option of full membership open. I understand the emotional reactions on the accession of Turkey, although these differ by country. When the partnership begins to work, our citizens will see that the movement launched in Turkey by Prime Minister Erdogan is oriented towards the EU and this will eliminate present fears. This is my sincere hope.* ◆

The EPP has, for some time, held talks with AKP Prime Minister Erdogan, to evaluate whether it can become a member of the EPP. Martens himself is affirmative.

◆ *We examined their objectives and program. It is strikingly clear that they have the commitment to strive for the same values. It is the first time that we observe this. As Turkey is a EU candidate country, the AKP can become an associate member of the EPP as was the case for the parties in Croatia and Bulgaria. The EPP will take a decision on this matter shortly. As far as I am concerned, what is important is that the AKP fulfills the conditions in striving for our values. If this is the case, then I will agree to have them join the EPP.* ◆

◆ *The Christian Democrats, together with parties such as the British Conservatives and the Party of Berlusconi, form the largest Group in the European Parliament, although the position of the Christians in Europe has considerably changed. They are now in a minority position, but it is exactly this minority situation which presents opportunities. I like to make the comparison with the time before Emperor Constantine made Christianity a state religion. We are now in a period when Christians are again an inspiring minority. We are, in fact, free now from a number of duties that prevented us for a long time to actively renew ourselves; because he who is the bearer of the political and social system is lacking freedom of movement.* ◆

Christians in Europe can, therefore, play an important role in the European society.

◆ *There is more susceptibility for the Christian belief itself; society awaits a singing message from the gospel and the churches, to give meaning to the relationships amongst people themselves and with God. The question is what will happen in the Catholic Church and what will be the position of the next Pope. Anyway, I am convinced that people look forward to an inspiring message that can give purpose to their life.* ◆