

EUROPEAN UNION: The influence of religious and secular lobbies in the EU, discussed at the European Parliament

By Jordan McMurtrey

HRWF (26.09.2012) - On 25 September 2012, a conference was hosted in the European Parliament by MEP Sophia in't VELD (ALDE group - Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Europe -), chair of the European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Politics (EPPSP), to discuss the influence of religious and secular lobbies in the European Union. David Pollock (*), International Humanist and Ethical Union and Pasquale Annicchinio, Research Fellow at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies and member of the EUI Ethics Committee, had been invited as experts on this issue. The speakers' remarks focused on two general aspects: The financing of conservative religious lobbies active in Brussels, often by US-based entities, and the increasing transfer of decision-making power over religious issues from Brussels (EU institutions) to Strasbourg (European Court of Human Rights).

Funding from America

The conference addressed the sources of funding and support of those involved in the religious lobby, drawing connections from lobbyists in Brussels to the Roman Catholic Church and Evangelical churches in America. Despite a lack of substantial empirical evidence on religious lobbies in Brussels, there have been preliminary studies which address the issue, said Pasquale Annicchinio. According to him, the studies have found that there are approximately 120 religious lobbies with influence in the EU, with 82 of those groups having offices in Brussels. Of these groups the Roman Catholic Church holds the greatest influence in the decision making process and passing of new legislation. Some secularists are alarmed by the influence that the religious lobby, especially Christians, are able to wield in parliament, particularly in light of the secularists' alleged lack of equal opportunity to affect policy in the EU.

Secularists present admitted that their lobby efforts are often scattered and need to be better organized in order to become more effective. However, they still have resentment over the power and influence associated with religion in EU institutions. Some secularists contend that the purpose of their lobby is to plead for equal rights for the people that they represent, while the religious lobby is trying to force its own values in issues of importance to secularists. Not surprisingly, the issues over which the secularist and religious lobbies clash are often the most controversial in Europe. Where these issues are decided, though, is another matter that the lobbies need to consider.

Shift to Strasbourg

A report presented at the conference highlighted the trend of important political issues being shifted to the judicial branch of the EU in Strasbourg rather than with lawmakers in Brussels. The polarizing nature of issues, such as stem cell research, gay marriage and abortion, make it difficult for politicians to address and take a stand one way or another. As a result the cases are transferred from policy makers in Brussels to the judicial system, making Strasbourg the latest battleground for important issues affecting EU politics.

As more information becomes available about religious lobbies in Brussels, a new approach may need to be taken. The change of venue for the controversial issues in Europe creates additional considerations as the secularist lobby looks to becoming more organised and the religious lobby struggles to maintain its current influence. Whatever the outcome, the final decision may be made in Strasbourg, not Brussels.

(*) A copy of the presentation of David Pollock can be provided on request by HRWF Int'l.