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Secular State Should Be Free, Vatican Tells Cuba

Recalls That Christianity Authored Church-State Separation

HAVANA, Cuba, JUNE 18, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- A state can be secular -- Christ himself said as much -- but this should not violate religious liberty, according to a Vatican official visiting Cuba.

Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, secretary for relations with states at the Vatican Secretariat of State, affirmed this when he opened the 10th Social Week held by the Church in Cuba.

The prelate is in Cuba for a six-day visit that concludes Sunday. His visit marks the 75th anniversary of the establishment of relations between the Holy See and Cuba.

The papal representative, born 58 years ago in Morocco but of French nationality, began by noting a paradox: "The term 'secularity,' both in the past as well as the present, refers above all to the reality of the state and takes on, not infrequently, a hue or meaning in opposition to the Church and to Christianity," however, "it would not exist if it wasn't for Christianity itself."

"In fact," he said, "without the Gospel of Christ the fundamental distinction between what man owes to God and what he owes to Caesar, that is, to civil society, would not have entered into the history of humanity."

Hence, a secular state should be founded on human rights, the prelate affirmed, including the right to religious liberty. And therefore, the ideas of neutrality or separation cannot be the principles that fundamentally define the state's position regarding religion.

Dangerous tendency

Archbishop Mamberti explained that a principle such as secularity has a "purely negative practical value -- of non-interference." Religious liberty, meanwhile, implies "a positive activity in order to defend, protect and promote with justice the concrete contents -- not of religion -- but of its manifestations with social relevance."

"Secularity, neutrality or separation are, hence, in themselves insufficient to define in a complete way the attitude that the state must have in relation to the creed of its citizens," he contended.

In fact, the Vatican official cautioned, when religious liberty is subordinated to some other principle, there is a tendency to turn "neutrality into agnosticism and separation into hostility."

"In such a case," he said, "paradoxically the state becomes a confessional state and no longer authentically secular, because it would make of secularity its supreme value, the determinant ideology, in fact a sort of religion, including with its civil rites and liturgies."

Harmonious

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Thus, according to Archbishop Mamberti: "For a state to say it is secular cannot mean to want to marginalize or reject the religious dimension or social presence of religious confessions.

"On the contrary, it should be the task of the state to recognize the key role of religious liberty and promote it positively."

The archbishop cited the words Pope John Paul II pronounced in Havana on Jan. 25, 1998: "The State, while distancing itself from all extremes of fanaticism or secularism, should encourage a harmonious social climate and a suitable legislation which enables every person and every religious confession to live their faith freely, to express that faith in the context of public life and to count on adequate resources and opportunities to bring its spiritual, moral and civic benefits to bear on the life of the nation."

Benedict XVI

Archbishop Mamberti also assured the Cuban people of "the paternal closeness of the Pope and the affectionate blessing that His Holiness Benedict XVI has entrusted to me for you."

"You know well that you can count on the Pope's closeness," he said, "and on the fraternal prayer and collaboration of the other particular Churches spread around the world."

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