

Speech of Simone Reissner in Warsaw on 29 March 2014

Ladies and gentlemen,

first of all I would like to thank the Polish Atheist Coalition for your invitation which gives me the opportunity to speak about a very interesting topic we are also faced with in our everyday life. In our times one can easily observe that the word democracy is widely spread and seems to be a kind of daily issue on the one hand. On the other hand we see that the word is used in an at least very superficial and confusing manner, to put it in a euphemistic way. But by far more often it is even worse because the term democracy is misused to justify acts against human rights, aggressions against sovereign states and so on.

Therefore it might be good to take a closer look at the etymology of the original meaning of the word democracy: "democracy" derives from the Greek word "demokratia" which falls into two components: "demos" meaning "the people", while "kratia" means "rule". So democracy means translated "the rule of the people" ("Volksherrschaft" in German, "popular government" is the English expression). The word itself is of Greek origin because historically democracy firstly appeared in Athens and the surrounding "city-states" about 500 years before our time. Democracy in the ancient world could develop after the successful victory of the free citizens over the ancient nobility (the latter was organized in oligarchic structures). Then the people or at least the citizens voted according to *their* interests and concerns in the agora. That is how democracy in its original meaning "the rule of the people" came into being in the history of mankind. Of course one should not idealize this political situation of the ancient world: the Greek states were based on slavery, and not everybody could vote on their issues in the agora – but at least a certain percentage of people could decide about their issues. Here again etymology is of further help: if we take a closer look, we can see that democracy is the contrary of oligarchy meaning the rule of a minority, whereas democracy is the rule of the majority: Oligarchy always meant the rule of a rich minority over a poorer majority whereas within democratic structures it is vice versa.

So this leads to another point of interest: the relation between democracy and criticism on religion. If we consider the European history of the last centuries, one is easily inclined to believe that the Enlightenment or at least fundamental criticism on religion is an obligatory precondition for the development of the modern democracy – but this is a fundamental mistake, the truth is just the other way around: democratic structures make people think more; therefore critical thoughts, especially on religion, can evolve more easily than in monarchic or oligarchic structures. When democracy came into the world, gods and demons simply held the losing cards. Free people who learned that intelligence is of value, not only on a subjective, but also on a material level, tend to think more critically. Statistically significantly more people will evolve and develop their critical mind, and they may ask themselves

more often: does this gasiform vertebrate really exist? The most intelligent ones will answer with Democritus that there are only atoms and their distances in between. The proof for this historical dynamics, the dependence of intelligence on the underlying power structure, again lies in history itself. If we take a look, for instance, at ancient Greece after democracy developed and spread, critical thinkers on religion also appeared: think of Anaxagoras who postulated a non-personal pantheism as a kind of polite form of atheism at those times. Another, even more radical example is Diagoras of Melos, a disciple of Democritus who had the courage to attack the Demeter cult in public. He was sentenced to death for that, but he could flee right in time to Corinth. By the way, already during his lifetime Diagoras of Melos had "the atheist" as a kind of nickname. And last but not least we think of Epicurus: his idea was that all the gods must stay in the intermundia, some in-between-worlds or extra world for the gods from where they cannot be of any harm for the humans.

Now, if we want to give the issue of democracy and religion a clearer shape, one should appreciate the principle of tolerance, because without tolerance democracy on the one hand, but also religious freedom on the other hand is not possible. The originally Latin verb "tolerare" means "to bear something", which means explicitly to bear thoughts and opinions you do neither share nor appreciate. The principle of tolerance also means the abstinence from violence in discussion though the discussed issue might be controversial. To put it in the words of one of the most famous leaders of the Enlightenment movement, Voltaire: "I do not at all share your opinion, and I will always oppose it; but I am ready to die for your right to freely express it." So tolerance did not mean something like politeness or abstinence from criticism; but it did and does mean abstinence from and absence of violence or similar unfairness in discussions. It also does not mean excluding someone from the debate, "not giving a forum" to him, as modern newspeak calls that, but on the contrary, it meant giving a forum to everybody, but to nobody the freedom of evading argumentation – under fair conditions as always. Forum means literally market, and exactly that was meant by the Enlightenment movement and Voltaire himself. Everybody may try to sell his goods on the market of opinions, nobody is excluded from it, and everybody has to pay the same fee for the same table, but not the weak one a high excessive fee and the strong one a low to symbolic fee; and nobody is urged to buy the goods. And furthermore and of course: tolerance does not mean freedom to commit crimes, even if these crimes, as lapidation, circumcisions, flagellation, etc., are inspired by religions; the very core of Enlightenment was and is the equality of all citizens before the law, and therefore their equal treatment by the state, especially when religion is concerned: no exceptions for big and old religions, no severity against small and new ones.

In the tradition of the Voltairian point of view, it is by all means the duty of all secularists to defend religious minorities against attacks of religious majorities or the state, even if the order to persecute a religious minority is given by the pope personally, some government or US President Obama himself. It is self-evident that

every sincere atheist agrees with the principle of tolerance in its original meaning, and we always need to keep an eye on a kind of perverted development within the atheist movement, namely that secularists become the paid or unpaid dogsbodies of the state which persecutes religious minorities and at the same time squanders our taxes to fatten the big churches.

As secularists we do not tolerate violence in the name of religion, but we do demand religious freedom; every religious organisation must be treated equally, no special treatment or disadvantage for any of them! We also must be tolerant towards purely symbolic rituals within religion. I have heard that Spanish atheists seriously asked for a prohibition of baptism; these people argued that baptism is as bad as circumcision. With this we strictly disagree, and we will always oppose this opinion: because you can wash away the dirt of religion you have been brainwashed with when being a child, but you will never get back your foreskin that has been cut off in the name of religion when you were a child. Generally speaking, we should not interfere with purely symbolic rites as they do not harm or at least not severely harm the integrity of children, in contrast to circumcision that does physically and in consequence psychologically severely injure the individual.

What I want to express is that we cannot protect children from all the means and ways of religion, even if they do work with social pressure and subtle psychological atrocities: of course unfair treatment happens in everyday life to children in religious families, but please keep in mind: if you want to control all these things you need a spy in every household. And also take into account that children need to develop antibodies against religion; they cannot develop them if they grow up in a sterile surrounding.

Added as a parenthesis, I would like to mention that it is of no use if kids tell us like a parrot that 2 plus 2 equals 4 because they believe this and they have never calculated it. Then reason itself becomes religious, they believe instead of understanding contexts.

Concerning democracy and religion last but not least I would like to point out one severe problem regarding the atheist movement of our days: in times of mass television making people reliably stupid, religion is not as essential for the ruling class anymore as it was in former times. Nowadays it seems to be quite en vogue to be an atheist, not a lot of courage is required to be one today; nobody needs to fear to die at the stake or to suffer social disadvantages for atheist thoughts. In the last years one could observe within the free thought movement in Europe that so-called atheists are having an eye to government positions or at least government-paid positions in the name of so-called reason or so-called democracy. Just to illustrate this with one detestable example: French so-called atheists openly support a government-paid institution of inquisition called MIVILUDES which is directly assigned to the French Prime Minister and has been solely founded to persecute religious minorities

by campaigns, by financially ruining them, by destroying their reputations – they simply spread lies, and they even demand to be granted immunity from criminal prosecution, which would mean that these modern inquisitors could not be legally punished for spreading their lies. So in a nutshell this is what so-called French atheists support: an institution of inquisition for persecuting minorities – how detestable!

Here I can just emphasize again a slogan of the original Enlightenment movement: “Écrasez l’infâme !”, whereas the Enlightenment movement did not at all tell us “Enviez l’infâme !” – destroy the monster and fight against it in the most effective manner, not admire, envy or brownnose the monster of religion.