



Centre for the Study of Religious and Cultural Diversity, Newbold College

EUROPEAN SUNDAY LAWS – AN UPDATE

It was a topic of special interest to Seventh-day Adventists: the progress of Sunday laws in the European Union (EU). At Newbold's March Diversity Lecture, Dr Brighton Kavaloh, Ministerial Association Secretary for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the UK, mapped out an intriguing history of these significant laws for a 60-strong audience so enthusiastic that some of them stood or sat on the floor.

Dr Kavaloh described 'the relentless attempts by groups in the European Union to legislate Sunday as an official weekly rest day.' He showed how the EU's discussions in the 1980s were initially linked to the health and safety measures for employees at work. 'There was no mention of Sunday,' he said. Then, in the early 90s, mentions of Sunday began to creep into the legal discourse and in 1993 the EU working time directive made provision for a minimum weekly rest period, which 'shall in principle include Sunday'.

Dr Kavaloh showed how in 1996, partially in response to the objections of British lawyers and politicians, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) annulled this provision because the Council had failed to explain why resting on Sunday had any more effect on the health and safety of workers than resting on any other day of the week. But the pressure continued into the 21st century and, in 2010 the First European Conference for the Protection of a Work-Free Sunday supported by 400 representatives from various religious, political and social organisations was held in the European Parliament. Opposition to making Sunday special continued in the British House of Lords where Lord Young of Norwood Green (Labour) suggested that, 'In a multi-faith and in many cases no-faith, multi-cultural and multiracial society, Sunday does not have the same significance for all people.' To which Baroness Wilcox, Parliamentary Under Secretary (Conservative) responded, "I can confirm all of that."

Dr Kavaloh included in his lecture a history of the European ideal of 'subsidiarity' from Aristotle through Thomas Aquinas and Pope Pius XI. He encouraged his audience to be aware that the ideal for European member states is to decide for themselves whether to have Sunday as a weekly day of rest and not a role for the European Union institutions or any other religious groups or associations.

He alerted them to the existence of the European Sunday Alliance - a network of national groups, trade unions, civil society organizations and religious communities committed to raising 'awareness of the unique value of synchronised free time for our European societies'. He suggested that, as part of that group, there is an increasingly strong Centre-Right group of Christian Democrats [MEPs] in the EU, the majority of which regard themselves as defenders of Roman Catholic traditions.

A useful Q&A session followed with insights into national thinking about Sunday laws with students and visitors from Croatia, Holland, and Norway. Pastor Kavaloh, as he likes to be called, insisted that the content of his lecture should be balanced by the gospel. "Just because our fellow-Christians think differently on this, does not mean that we should not seek for that ground on which Christ brings all of us together," he said. "Treat one another with respect," he insisted. "Don't go out making enemies and being uncouth."