



European Humanist Federation

international non-profit association under Belgian law

Fédération Humaniste Européenne

association internationale sans but lucratif de droit belge

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Mr Jerzy Buzek
President
European Parliament

[By email to jerzy.buzek@europarl.europa.eu]

9 August 2009

Dear Mr Buzek

I write on behalf of the European Humanist Federation, which represents forty-two organisations in nineteen countries.

We congratulate you on your election as President of the European Parliament, in succession to Mr Hans-Gert Pöttering, with whom we have had productive exchanges. We hope the same may be true with you.

We have read in the press that you wish “to deepen dialogue with Europe’s Christian churches”, and that you have said that

“a debate with churches and other religions on our continent’s problems is essential. I have no doubt that Christian values should be very important at an individual level for each politician and leader, but also collectively since they define and show the key ways a politician can act. . . Respect for others who think differently is also a special value for Christians. Such is my understanding of the presence of these values in social and political life. I have never manifested my faith in a persistent manner. The best way of showing what we believe in is through our own actions and behaviour in daily life, and by acting publicly in a way which reflects our deep Christian faith.”

We respect your strong religious belief, and we recognise that your remarks were apparently made to a Polish news agency and thus perhaps for a domestic audience.

However, we wish to make several points to you in your role as President of the Parliament, in which capacity you represent not just the Christians of Europe but everyone of all beliefs and none.

First, may we remind you that not all Europeans and not all European politicians are Christian. Indeed, surveys suggest that between a third and a half of Europeans do not follow any religion.

More importantly, the dialogue to which the European Union is committed (subject to ratification) by the Lisbon Treaty is not just with religions, let alone just with the Christian churches, but also with what the Treaty calls 'non-confessional and philosophical organisations' such as ourselves. We look forward to meeting you for such exchanges.

To suggest, therefore, that 'Christian values' should apply to 'each politician and leader' and 'define and show the key ways a politician can act', unless interpreted in so broad a way as to be empty of meaning, is a claim for the superiority of Christian values that is improper for anyone speaking in a representative role for the European Union, whose people hold numerous religious and non-religious beliefs.

This is not in any way to deny that a Christian faith may motivate a politician - or indeed anyone - in ways that she or he finds valuable and inspiring; nor is it to deny that some Christian values are admirable and widely shared by people of other beliefs - after all, the 'golden rule' has been a feature of all moral systems since ancient Egypt.

However, when you advocate (supposing you are correctly reported) 'acting publicly in a way which reflects our deep Christian faith' you propose a way of conducting yourself in your high public office that, depending on how it is construed, approaches the improper. Your role as president of the Parliament is not to act as a representative of the Christian religion but of the Parliament and all its members and beyond them the whole population of Europe. Acting explicitly as a Christian may usually be benign but it can also be highly controversial: humanists and secularists would maintain indeed that it can often be damaging to the welfare and freedom of many people.

When, further, you say that "a debate with churches and other religions on our continent's problems is essential", you not only ignore the 'philosophical and non-confessional' organisations that represent a large section of the European public and a tradition that has been immensely important in the formation of European culture: you also suggest granting a privileged position to belief organisations (even including the non-religious tradition) that is highly questionable.

Why should the churches and other such organisations (ourselves included) be singled out as having an 'essential' contribution to make to the solution of Europe's problems? First, the problems that are within the remit of the European Union do not overlap substantially with the concerns of such organisations. Secondly, by privileging the churches and other religions you demote the importance both of expert non-governmental organisations and of democratic organisations representative of the European public. The former have expertise that overlaps extensively with the concerns of the European Union and the latter have a direct connection with bodies of European citizens. Both therefore have a more legitimate claim to a role in the formation of European policy than the churches, whose expertise is largely irrelevant and which are in the main far from democratic or representative of their claimed followers.

You say that 'respect for others who think differently is also a special value for Christians'. We recognise this - while claiming the same virtue for ourselves - and we hope therefore both that you will understand that this letter is written with sincere respect for your beliefs and that in receiving it you will respect our own sincerity and give serious consideration to the points we make - points that are deeply rooted in our principles and beliefs and are concordant with the abjuration of discrimination that is a hallmark of the European Union.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Pollock', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

David Pollock
President