



EUROPEAN HUMANIST FEDERATION

NEWSLETTER - OCTOBER 2000

Prepared by E.Nagant and G. Liénard

News of the board

The new Board elected by the General Assembly last May held its first meeting in Brussels on September 9.

Draft Strategic Plan

A draft strategic plan (DSP) for the next years presented by the Secretary General was discussed by the Board and approved. Some topics actually under development are briefly summarised below. The detailed version is available on request.

The general approach of work, with a general secretariat (G.S.) running with limited means, has been defined according to European humanist priorities.

During the last years, it has clearly appeared that humanist values have not sufficiently been taken into account by the various European Institutions, although considerable efforts have been made, in particular by the EHF GS.

Humanist (laïques) positions have to be drawn up more firmly on different topics and also be made more visible, not only within the European Institutions but also towards the various national representatives.

Let us point out that the European Union is organised in a different way from its member States. Most of the subjects in preparation or in discussion in European circles have to be adopted by national ministers and/or national Parliaments of the member States.

Thus it is quite possible for our member organisations to intervene directly on their national level. Unfortunately it seems that many people are not conscious of this and are of the opinion that everything is "decided in Brussels by a few Eurocrats".

In order to intervene to promote humanism in the actual process of EU construction, we need to organise ourselves on two levels for the same target:

- for actions in the European Institutions as a whole
- for actions through national representatives and governments

Global action will be devoted to the board and the G.S, while national actions will be endeavoured by the members with the help of documents sent by the G.S. and prepared by the networks or the members.

First of all, it is necessary to identify priorities and to avoid dispersion of effort and to develop better information between us.

Newsletter: An important effort of information and communication is endeavoured. Information is divided into two parts: news of an administrative character and information of what is going on in European Institutions for which a humanist action may be required. Most of the newsletters are now sent by email at reduced costs.

Web site: The actual web site of EHF is under large improvement, with the help of the Centre d'Action Laïque.

A new and direct address has been obtained and will be used in a short time.

European Humanist Professionals: A large number of humanist professionals work, together with volunteers, in our member associations, in several countries. It is probably one of the distinctive feature of humanist actions in Europe. Both EHF and EHP will benefit from a better and clearer relationship.

Networks:

Development co-operation: the Multatuli network is interested in examining how to strengthen collaboration between humanist associations working in this field and in developing partnerships.

Bioethics: The bioethics network is continuing to follow the works of several commissions:

- Group of experts in bioethics of the European Commission
- Council of Europe
- Bioethics committee of UNESCO

Thinking freely about Europe: This lunch and debate programme aims at fostering, in Brussels, a network of people having close connections with the institutions and at guaranteeing a permanent visibility for humanism among the civil servants of the European institutions and the public interested in European matters.

Civil Society Forum (CSF): by its participation in the CSF, EHF will gather interesting information on all kinds of European questions concerning the civil society.

Appointments

The Board appointed Claude Wachtelaer as EHF special representative to the lunch and debate activity "Thinking freely about Europe" and also to the Co-ordinating Committee of "A Soul for Europe".

Meeting with the President of the European Commission

The Board decided to ask an audience with Mr. Prodi, President of the European Commission. The President and the Secretary General would represent EHF.

Civil Society Forum

The Board asked for follow-up information on the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union to be sent to member organisations. Information, as well as the address of the European Commission website, had already been transmitted in the June Newsletter and in its August supplement.

European Humanist Professionals

The Board of EHP joined the Board of EHF for a discussion on relations and collaboration between both organisations.

EHP would remain an independent organisation and co-operate with EHF for specific activities like conferences or seminars. Both would have their general assembly on the same day, but not at the same time. It was felt there was no need for observers on board meetings, as some people were members of both boards. The EHP journal could be published jointly with EHF. There would be room for EHP on EHF website and in EHF newsletter.

Next Board Meeting

It will take place in January.

European News

European Parliament - European Commission

European Commission Draft Directive 565, establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation

Article 13 of the Treaty establishing the European Community as modified by the Amsterdam Treaty puts an end to the long-term debate on Community competence in anti-discrimination issues.

Its text reads: "...the Council, acting unanimously on a proposal from the Commission and after consulting the European parliament, may take appropriate action to combat discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation."

The National Secular Society (U.K.) reacted vigorously in writing against the expected discriminations article 4.2 can create.

Aware of the amendments presented by the European Parliament in October, EHF sent a vigorous protest to the Commission and invited all its members to do the same.

EQUAL TREATMENT IN EMPLOYMENT AND OCCUPATION

Proposal for a European Commission Directive 565

The humanist associations took action when the IGC took place in Amsterdam, in 1997, on the subject of former article 6A, now article 13 of the Treaty, which authorises the Council to "take appropriate action to combat discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation".

Our aim was and remains to obtain a protection as large as possible against all forms of discrimination against anyone.

One can be satisfied to see that article 13 broadly meets this demand.

The Commission and the Council have undertaken to put into concrete form the principles defined in article 13 and have presented a draft directive to the Parliament for consultation. Its amendments have just been brought out. The procedure is thus getting to an end.

The European Humanist Federation strongly reacts to "the differences of treatment" that article 4 of the draft directive would allow.

First of all, the explanatory memorandum presents as "genuine occupational qualifications" the differences of treatment granted to "organisations which promote *certain* religious values, certain jobs or occupations need to be performed by employees who share the relevant religious opinion".

Why only religious organisations ?

Are religious organisations the only ones which promote "*certain values*" in society ?

But there is worse.

The proposed amendments extend the differences of treatment not only to occupations related to the practice of a religion, as presented in the explanatory memorandum, but to the wider fields of education, of social services and health care.

A health, social or educational institution would only have to belong to any group promoting "*certain religious values*" to be within the field of application of the differences of treatment of article 4 and so be allowed any form of discrimination in employment.

Such a provision is all the more offensive as it also concerns public institutions which are run by public funding that is to say funds provided by the whole community.

Considering the large number of schools and hospitals which receive public subsidies and are linked with religious organisations, the provisions of article 14 make the generous provisions provided for by the Treaty insubstantial.

The workers who will be affected by the upholding of discrimination in employment will of course remain always the same ones : women and those who are considered as outcasts, because of sexual orientation, ideology or anything else ...

The European Humanist Federation urges the Council, the Commission and the Parliament to strictly limit the special dispensations which must not concern any organisation whatsoever which provide services akin to public services.

Charter of Fundamental Rights

The Consilium published the definitive draft Charter of Fundamental Rights on September 28. (Available on [http://db.consilium.eu.int/dfdocs/](http://db.consilium.eu.int/dfddocs/)).

It has now to be discussed by the Council of Nice (France) next December.

EHF follows week after week the situation along with many NGO's involved in this issue at the Forum of Civil Society. This INGO receives direct information from the Commission.

All the recognised NGO's are of the opinion that the draft Charter is actually unsatisfactory and that it will have to be submitted to a large public discussion next year before final approval, they also want the debate not to be closed at the Council of Ministers of Nice.

EHF had to react rapidly, in the last week of September, to a modification of the introduction, fortunately withdrawn after a few days.

Read below the EHF document. (Based on a document of the Presidium of 21/9/2000)

Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union

The preamble to the reference document, in its second paragraph, states that the Union is based on principles "taking as a starting point its cultural heritage, humanistic and religious".

The reference to a religious tradition modifies the context of the Preamble of the preceding versions on which the European NGO's had the possibility to express themselves. It modifies the scope considerably and presents, in our eyes, serious dangers of deviation.

Let us note, first of all, that the reference to the religious tradition is perfectly inappropriate with regard to any charter - particularly of fundamental rights - because, contrary to the States of the "Ancien Régime", the Right and the Law are not given any more to the people under cover of a religious power but adopted by the representatives democratically elected by the citizens. It is a guiding principle of any parliamentary democracy, which, in Europe, presents a fundamental difference with the "religious tradition". Should it be recalled that, until the first half of the 20th century, the Catholic Church was opposed to different great principles on which democracy is based.

To recall a religious heritage in order to found Europe, is to forget that religions have been and are still a factor of division between peoples, vectors of intolerance in the name of a truth, which is called the "only one" by each and every religion. It is sufficient to read the recent Declaration "Dominus Jesu" by the Congregation for the doctrine of the faith, dated August 6, 2000.

Religious conflicts in Europe and elsewhere, alas, still exist.

Does one want to recall the religious heritage of Spain and Isabelle the Catholic or of France and the "religious wars" ?

This is a past which one has to remember nonetheless, if its heritage is claimed so much so that it must be written down in the preamble of a charter which concerns all the citizens of Europe in the 21st century.

But our concern is different:

If one can refer to any part of this "heritage", this will permit

- to continue to claim privileges for those who want them, the representatives of the Churches
- to continue to demand the condemnation of any upsetting argument considered as blasphemy
- to continue to oppose, especially in the fields of ethics and morals, any disposition considered to be contrary to the doctrine
- all this without any concern for those who do not adhere to these opinions

Under these conditions, the European Humanist Federation and the Belgian Conseil Central Laïque join together in order to express their refusal of a Charter, which would be based on these principles.

It would be advisable to keep the text of the preamble drawn up on July 28, avoiding the evocation of heritages which divide, by simply and clearly stating that "the Union is based on the indivisible and universal principles of human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity; it is based on the principles of democracy and the rule of law".

Would it not be preferable and sufficient to reaffirm, like in Article 10 of the draft Charter "the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion".

Let us remark also, to finish, that the claim to freedom of religion which expresses the right of any individual to choose his/her religion, to change this choice or not to have a religion, is in no way a heritage from the religious tradition.

News of the members

Norwegian humanists loose second round in court

by Steinar Nilsen, EHF president

Norway's Human-Etisk Forbund (HEF) lost, in September, the second bout in court, where they are prosecuting the state of Norway about a new topic for religious education in schools. A few years ago, life stances outside the Lutheran State church were granted absence from school teachings of

christianity. Instead, children had their own neutral lessons about religions and non-religious life stances such as humanism. Then the Norwegian parliament decided to change it all.

A new subject called "Knowledge of christianity with information on religions and life stances" (sic!) was introduced. The wise men and women of the parliament intended (so they said) that this should be suitable for all denominations and life stances, and there would thus no longer be any need for splitting classes when education about the main questions in life was up. A good idea, that, heartily supported by HEF who has lobbied for this for many years. The problem, though, was that they lied. The new subject heavily favours Lutheran christianity, and has caused protest from all other groups, such as Jews, Muslims and even Christian communities that are not State Lutheran. They all feel discriminated against, although the majority of the kind Norwegian parliamentarians assure them that this is not the case.

HEF then brought the matter to court on behalf of several humanist families. Predictably the case was lost, first in Oslo city court, and now in the regional court. The mess now goes on to the Norwegian High Court, and when it is lost there (most probably), it will likely end up in the European Court in Strasbourg. At that point things may change, and hopefully the state of Norway will be taught the lesson that a vital part of democracy is that you treat your minorities with respect. This has not been done here; the majority has completely ignored the statements of the minority. The sad thing about this is that the process takes years, and in the meantime children are subject to religious indoctrination in Norwegian schools, directly contrary to the Human rights declaration specifying that parents are the ones that choose what sort of religious or non-religious education their children should have.

Websites

A few more sites worth the visit :

Libre Pensée Luxembourgeoise <http://webplaza.pt.lu/public/ferwey/index.html>

Liberté de Conscience <http://www.libco.lu/>

Internationaler Bund der Konfessionslosen und Atheisten (IBKA) <http://www.ibka.org>

You can advertise YOUR website HERE ! Just let us know the internet address.

News of the Networks

“A Soul for Europe” initiative - funding possibilities

By Claude Wachtelaer, President of the Coordinating Committee

“A Soul for Europe – ethics and spirituality” is an initiative supported by the European Commission (Forward Studies Unit and Directorate General for Education and Culture).

Its aims are to promote the ethical and spiritual dimension of the European construction and to promote dialogue between the various religious and spiritual traditions, including the humanist tradition.

Since its beginning in 1995, several humanist projects have received funds through this initiative (a conference in Warsaw, a seminar in Utrecht, etc).

This is one of the rare possibilities for humanist organisations to get money from the European institutions so you should give it some consideration.

Projects should emphasise the European dimension, address ethical and spiritual rather than political issues and, thanks to the realisation of the activity, provide “added value for Europe”.

There is now a very good probability that money for projects presented within the scope of the Soul for Europe initiative will be available next year.

Due to the very bureaucratic treatment of the applications, advanced planning is imperative. The probable deadline for the next train of applications will be March 2001. That means the activities should not be planned to take place before October of the same year.

Mrs Win Burton, coordinator of the initiative, has prepared a set guideline available on request.

News of the Federation

Colloquium "Humanism and Buddhism"

EHF was invited last September to deliver a talk on humanism (laïcité in French) at a colloquium on "Humanism and Buddhism" held at the Flemish Free University of Brussels.

It was attended by more than 250 participants who were very interested by the general principle of "laïcité", considered as a means to organise a tolerant and multicultural society.

European Social Laboratory

EHF was invited to attend a conference, organised by the European Social Laboratory, on October 18, in the European Parliament in Brussels, on the subject "New governance and the social dimension of enlargement". The conference was mainly devoted to exclusion (from pension schemes, health care...).

New governance is new method adopted by UE, encouraging the member States to define their own objectives, at regional and national levels, with reference to European bench marks.

Humanists have to pay attention not only to the proposed bench marks but also to their practical application in the European member states.

The case of Dr. Shaikh

You have certainly received a message from IHEU pointing out that Dr Shaikh has been under arrest in his country and booked for blasphemy. If he is found guilty, he will be killed.

EHF president has immediately sent a letter to the Pakistani government.

To General Pervez Musharraf
Government of Pakistan
Dear Sir,

It has been brought to my attention that dr. Younus Shaikh was arrested on October 4, 2000, and imprisoned in Adyala Jail in Rawalpindi. I would urge you to bring about his release.

I have visited Pakistan - including Islamabad - several times, always been well received and have a good impression of the friendliness and hospitality of many Pakistani citizens. I was never criticised for not being a muslim or for what I did believe or not believe in.

I am thus very surprised to learn that dr. Shaikh has been imprisoned, allegedly for blasphemy. As far as I have been informed, he is a peaceful man who would be much more useful for his country working as a doctor instead of being in jail.

I trust that you will give this matter your attention, and hope you will see to it that doctor Shaikh is released from prison.

Sincerely yours,
Steinar Nilsen
President of the European Humanist Federation
Citizen of Norway

New staff member

As announced by Suzy Mommaerts at the last board meeting, a new temporary staff member was appointed by the Unie Vrijzinnige Verenigingen to work full time on European matters with EHF. Uschi Van Gheluwe is now in charge of preparing a conference, in collaboration with EHP and other associations, on the subject "Citizenship in a democratic, pluralistic and multicultural society", planned for next year.

In the next future

Thinking freely about Europe

The next lunch and debate of "Thinking freely about Europe" will take place on the first Friday of December at 1 pm., in a restaurant nearby the European buildings in Brussels. The topic will be on the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

Those of you travelling through Brussels are welcome and kindly requested to apply for the lunch at the EHF secretariat (Edith Nagant), if possible a day before.

Miscellaneous

Next newsletter

EHF member organisations are welcome to send information to be published in the Newsletter. For the next issue it should reach us before December 20.

How to contact EHF

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