



NEWSLETTER

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SPECIAL ISSUE

Convention on the Future of Europe

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All the EHF documents can be found on the EHF web site www.humanism.be or are available from the EHF office.

1. The European Convention

Created following the Laeken European Council in December 2001, the Convention brings together representatives of governments, national parliaments, the European Parliament and the European Commission.

Its purpose is to propose a new framework and new structures for the European Union which are geared to changes in the world situation, the needs of the citizens of Europe and the future development of the European Union.

Its deliberations are public and its documents are available to the public on <http://european-convention.eu.int>

Organisations representing civil society can contribute to the debate.

2. The main issues

The main job of the Convention is the drafting of a **European Constitution**.

A preliminary draft Constitutional Treaty was presented by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, President of the Convention on 28 and 29 October.

The main job for EHF is to see that the future Constitution is in no way discriminatory and is acceptable by all the citizens of the European Union.

3. Involvement of EHF

Since the beginning of 2002, EHF Group Civitas, with the collaboration of humanists expert in different fields and of various organisations, has gathered information, held regular meetings to study it and to draw up documents presenting the humanist viewpoints.

EHF has also been very much present in a large range of meetings and events connected with the European Convention and the European Constitution.

For example :

- meetings of the Permanent Forum of civil society
- public hearing of the European Parliament and of the European Parliament Committee on Citizens' Freedoms and Rights, Justice and Home Affairs

- meetings of the European Economic and social Committee
 - meetings set up by the European Commission Group of Political Advisors
 - EHF Secretary General gave a talk on “From the Charter of Fundamental Rights to the European Constitution” at the conference that the Unione degli Atei e degli Agnostici Razionalisti (UAAR) organised, in February 2002, in Rome, with the Società laica e plurale and many other organisations, on “2004 : a humanist Constitution for Europe”.
 - Vera Pegna, member of the EHF Board, presented a paper at a colloquium in Palermo (Italy) on September 2, organised by the Community of Sant’Egidio: "Faith and Culture within Conflict and Dialogue" where the introduction of god and the Christian heritage into the European Constitution was dealt with.
 - organisation with the Polska Federacja Humanistyczna (Poland) of a two-day conference in Warsaw, in October 2002, on “Humanism and democracy in Central Europe : co-existence of different life stances. Making a humanist platform on human rights in view of the challenges of the enlargement”.
- The first day was devoted to “Human rights and freedoms in the Constitution of the European Union”.
- the UAAR National Vice-Secretary represented EHF at a lecture by Stefano Rodotà on the Convention on the Future of Europe and on the European Constitution that also took place in Rome.
 - EHF took part in the conference on “Convention and Partnership with Civil Society” in October 2002, in Brussels, organised by the European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture
 - EHF was also present at the conference set up by the Group Avicenne, in the European Parliament, in October 2002, on “The European State : from the Convention to a Constitution ?”
 - and at the seminar of the Parliamentary Group of the Party of European Socialists, on “Public services and sustainable development”, set up to prepare its contribution to the European Convention.

4. Sessions of information and dialogue on the European Convention

EHF representatives attended all the sessions of information and dialogue that were held at the European Economic and Social Committee in April, May, June, October and November 2002.

5. EHF contribution to the Convention on the Future of Europe

EHF drew up, in June 2002, a document “Contribution to the Convention on the Future of Europe” that was sent to the Convention and posted on its web site.

The main points of this document are :

- EHF considers that a new article of the Treaty should recognise the consultative role of civil society organisations, offering them a structured communication channel independent from socio-economic partners.
- A democratic legitimacy is indispensable within the organisations requesting their recognition.
- The Union should not discriminate between citizens according to their philosophical and religious convictions. Churches should thus not be given a special status within the European institutions.
- EHF proposes that a structured dialogue be set up between civil society and the European institutions under the political responsibility of the European Parliament.

6. The Humanist point of view versus the Catholic Church point of view

Contact groups had been established to allow for an exchange of views with specific sectors of civil society in preparation of the plenary session.

The representatives of the Catholic Church set out the position of the COMECE (Commission of the Bishops' Conference of the European Community) that had been much mentioned in the media and heavily backed by the Pope. It was asked that god and transcendence were mentioned in the preamble of a future Constitutional Treaty.

EHF expressed its refusal of this and pointed out that contrary to what COMECE claims, Churches do not represent the citizens.

The rapporteur of the group on culture was thus forced to explicitly state the EHF standpoint at the hearing of the plenary session and his report does not mention the bishops' demand.

All this did not go unnoticed. Agence Europe mentioned the EHF standpoint in its bulletin of 24 June 2002 stating that EHF requested the Convention to avoid any discrimination between confessional and non-confessional convictions, that it was opposed to any mention, in the text of the future constitutional treaty, of god or to any mention of a religious tradition, that referring to the wars of religion, EHF said that 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 and that it could be simply and clearly stated that "the Union is based on the undividable and universal principles of human dignity, on liberty, equality and solidarity; it is based on the principles of democracy and the rule of Law".

7. 24-25 June Plenary Session - Humanist Platform "Communities of faith and conviction and the European Union"

The EHF position "Communities of faith and conviction and the European Union" was presented at the June Convention Plenary Session and circulated in the European Commission.

The main points are as follows :

- Good European governance must ensure that the legislation and the practice concerning the Churches and the religions in the countries of the European Union are not likely to be discriminatory with regards to all the citizens, in respect of article 13 of the Treaty.
- The Union separates religion and governance. It is not concerned with the specific contributions that Churches can bring to their members.
- The Union invites the Churches to promote dialogue between them, to give up proselytism and to avoid resorting to the concept of religious identity which still stirs up so many conflicts.
- The Union cannot take any stand with regards to the citizens by seeking its legitimacy in religion or in an invocation to god.
- The European Union must not set any discrimination between the convictions of the citizens who believe in heaven and of those who do not.

8. European Humanist organisation are also involved

Belgium – Centre d'Action Laïque and Unie Vrijzinnige Verenigingen

Both Belgian humanist organisations have written to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Foreign Affairs to congratulate them for taking publicly a stand against any mentioning of a religious heritage in the European Constitutional Treaty.

Italy - UAAR Press release

European Convention President meets the Pope (31 October 2002)

On 30 October 2002, the day before Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, President of the European Convention, was due to meet with the Pope in Rome, EHF and UAAR (Unione degli Atei e degli Agnostici Razionalisti) issued a press release to the Italian press stating the same views as those that had been set out concerning the June statement of the COMECE (see above).

Luxembourg – Liberté de Conscience

Liberté de Conscience has urged the Luxembourg representatives in the European Parliament to oppose the inclusion of a reference to the divinity in the future European Constitution, in order to ensure equality between all the citizens of the European Union.

Poland - Polska Federacja Humanistyczna

The Polska Federacja Humanistyczna set up with EHF a conference in Warsaw, in October 2002, on "Humanism and democracy in Central Europe : co-existence of different life stances. Making a humanist platform on human rights in view of the challenges of the enlargement" at the end of which a proposal concerning the protection of human rights and freedoms in the future Constitution of the European Union was issued. EHF is going to make good use of this document.

Slovakia – Spolocnost Prometheus

Prometheus Society issued a special edition of their magazine Prometheus on the "Joint action of central European humanists condemning discrimination by the State policy", depicting the discriminations against non-believers in Slovakia, Poland and the Czech Republic, and made it circulate to quite many institutions and public authorities.

On behalf of the Slovak humanist organisation, EHF forwarded this information to the Head of States of the European Union and to various European institutions and organisations as well as to all the members of the European Parliament in Brussels and also to the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg.

United Kingdom – National Secular Society

Keith Porteous Wood, NSS Executive Director, gave a talk, defending the humanist standpoint, at a conference held by the University of Newcastle, on 29 October, on "Structured Pluralism and a Practical Legal Framework for Faith in the European Union", primarily attended by lawyers interested in furthering formal religious influence in the EU. From what he heard during the conference, the European Commission is on the brink of creating a third 'super directorate', devoted exclusively to religious affairs.

Please keep EHF informed of any action your organisation has taken concerning the European Convention and the future European Constitution. Thank you.

9. What is at stake ? What action now ?

Even though EHF has very limited means in human and material resources, it is doing its utmost to keep up with all this is being developed in the European institutions and in the Convention on the Future of Europe.

You have all heard that the Catholic Church is pressing hard to have the future EU constitution refer explicitly to the role of religion. This would not only be discriminatory

against all the non-religious who make up for between 30 and 50 percent of the UE population, but highly dangerous too.

No one wants a revival of holy wars ...

EHF is at the front in Brussels, but YOU and YOUR ORGANISATION are NEEDED too.

What for ?

To give EHF feed back on what is going on your country and your point of view on various issues important for all humanists, like for example :

- education
- sustainable development
- human rights
- participative democracy and the role of NGO's
- public services
- social cohesion
- the European Constitution
- and so on ...

To represent humanism and set out its standpoints on YOUR NATIONAL LEVEL.

How ?

You can work together with the EHF Brussels team and work groups on particular issues, you can use the EHF documents and send yours to EHF (press releases, standpoints, letters to national ministers, European members of Parliament or civil servants,...). Everyone has to devise one's own and most appropriate way for acting.

If we, humanists, get all together now, we can have a say in the drafting of the EU Constitution, in the way the future European institutions are set up, and also in the way citizens are taken into account, more particularly the non-believing citizens.

Some of us are not yet citizens of the European Union, but they will soon be ! Some of us will not be for quite some time – whatever the reasons – or may never be, but they can help give some real meaning to the words “concern, responsibility and solidarity”.

Many thanks to all of you.

This Newsletter has been drawn up by Georges Liénard, EHF General Secretary and by Edith Nagant, International Relations Officer.

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