

European Humanist Federation in the European Union

15th anniversary
June 2006

Introduction	4
Charter of Fundamental rights	6
Hearing at the European Parliament (21/03/2001)	6
White Paper for European Governance	7
European Union foundations	7
The values	7
Reinforcing the rule of law	7
Civil society	8
A link between politics and citizen	8
The civil society's actors	8
The contribution of the Churches	8
The contribution of the “communities of conviction and of faith ”	9
Democratically elected partners	9
Eliminate discriminations according to philosophic and religious convictions	9
Science and society	10
The new information and communication technologies : democratising their access	10
Teaching and learning	10
Citizens' relation to science	11
Precaution and responsibility principles	11
Responsibility principle	11
Role of the experts	12
Role of public sector in reinforcing social cohesion	12
Five lines of action to reinforce direct (close to the people) democracy	13
Convention "For the future of Europe"	14
God in the preamble of the treaty	14
Improving the relation with the citizen	14
Dialogue	15
Communities of faith and conviction	15
The message of the Churches	16
No discrimination according to philosophical and religious convictions	17
Statement on Secularism in Europe (Rome 9/02/2002)	17
Humanism and secularism in Europe	18
For the withdrawal of article 37, an appeal to the Convention	19
Democratic life in the Union	19
Council of ministers and the Treaty	21
Campaign for withdrawal of article 52	21
Draft Letter for your association to send	21
What is at stake ?	22
Appeal to Decision-Makers on the future EU Constitution	22
Why article 51 ?	23
Separation of Church and State	24
The church's strategy	24
European Parliament	26

Memento for the European election (June 2004)	26
Introduction	26
European convention on human rights	26
European constitution	26
Separation between Churches and the European institutions	27
Status of the Churches	27
Equality of rights – Principle of subsidiarity	27
Admission of new Member States	28
Immigration and asylum policy	28
Europe, vector of peace	28
European foreign policy	29
Importance of cultural creation	29
Ethics	29
Demand for security	29
Fight against exclusion and poverty	30
Scientific research	30
Sustainable development	30
Representation of civil society	30
Public services	31
Multiparty working group for separation of religion and politic	31
Slovak concordat	31
Letter on Slovakian Concordat with the Holy See	32
Legal appraisal on concordats	33
Summary of opinion 4-2005 from the EU network of independent experts on fundamental rights on the right of conscientious objection and the conclusion by EU member states of concordats with the holy see (14 December 2005)	31
European Commission	36
Directive establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and education. .	36
Memorandum to the Presidency of the European Union	36
Views on the Europe Union	37
Political aspects	37
European Constitution	38
Coherent policy of immigration and of asylum.	38
Joining of new member States	38
Separation Churches – Union	39
Equality of rights	39
Importance of cultural creation	39
Ethics	40
Fight against exclusion and poverty	40
Europe vector of peace	40
Representation of civil society	41
Audience of EHF Board by President Barroso (November 9, 2005)	41
A press release	41
Address of EHF President to President Barroso	41
Organisation of Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)	43
Drugs trade : let us regulate the sales of drugs for the freedom and the safety of all (whether they are users or not)	41
Humanist values	43
The international context	43
A public health experiment	44
Is this the solution ?	44
Requests	45

Position on different matters	45
Euthanasia at Council of Europe	45
Death sentence: case of Dr. Shaikh	46
To reject the candidature of R. Buttiglione as Commissioner of Freedom, security and Justice ..	46
The European Commission invites the Church of Scientology and expels the humanists	46
EHF and the EU Constitutional Treaty	47
Freedom of expression and caricatures	47
Information	49
International Colloquia	50
Conclusion	51
A few pictures	52

Introduction

EHF-FHE federates most humanist organisations from European countries, including Central European countries. The European Humanist Federation has the status of an international association by Belgian law with its head office in Brussels. ¹ The working languages are French and English. The main objective of the EHF-FHE is to represent its members and to promote the principles of humanism and of a secular society in the European institutions. Many international conferences and colloquia are organised with member associations in different countries, generally with a financial support from the Commission.

EHF-FHE and its member organisations have paid particular attention to several aspects of the evolution of the European Union. Let us mention positions from a humanist point of view on matters such as the human rights, ethics, development co-operation, liberties, democratic principles, citizenship or separation between Churches and State. EHF-FHE has intervened several times at public hearings, e.g. for the preparation of the Amsterdam Intergovernmental Conference (1997 IGC), the elaboration of a Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union in 2000, or in the preparation of the White Paper of the EU Commission in 2001 and 2002.

A specialised working group was particularly active in preparing humanist positions to be presented to the "Convention for the Future of Europe" in 2002 and 2003. The main relevant subjects were: non discrimination according to philosophical and religious convictions, participative democracy to develop a European citizenship, a democratic control through the EU Parliament, completing a European social Charter, reinforcement the role of the public sector notably in the areas of education and health, improvement of sustainable development perspectives...

Finally EHF insistently requests that the constitutional Treaty stipulates that the Union rests on following universal and non-negotiable principles : dignity of men and women, freedom, equality, solidarity and tolerance, and on the principles of democracy and the rule of law. All these positions were posted on the Convention web site to be addressed to the Convention members.

In a general way, these different actions are guided by the concern of developing in the European Union, participative democracy, tolerance towards the various trends of thinking as well as equality of rights for citizens whatever their religious or philosophical convictions. Good European governance in the European Union 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.

From June 2003 onwards, EHF initiated a campaign and organised press conferences with many other NGO's and European networks (International Planned Parenthood Federation/European Network, Catholics for a Free Choice/ Europe, the European Network Church on the Move, AFEM, Gay and Lesbians ILGA, Right to die Europe, and others) for the withdrawal of article 51 from the European Constitution that gives the right to Churches to interfere in the EU Institutions. Many NGO's are fearing that Churches, and mainly the Catholic Church, will use their position to limit access to family planning and safe abortion and also to obstruct progress and debates on issues such as sexual orientation and divorce as well as abuses their influence to promote

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abstinence as the only 'contraceptive' choice, thus contributing to the dramatic spread of HIV/AIDS and unwanted pregnancies among young people.

The activities of EHF are more and more related to the European Institutions. That is why, at the occasion of EHF 15th anniversary, this document reproduces the most important interventions of EHF and of some of its partners, since the beginning of the J. Delors presidency, in 1999.

Charter of Fundamental rights

The European Humanist Association (EHF) was invited like other registered associations to present proposals and comments on a draft document presented by the EU Commission, planned as a Charter of Fundamental Rights.

EHF was presenting a position at a hearing of the EU Parliament and a comprehensive document was put on the commission web site.

The document, presented in French, was dealing in particular with freedom of conscience, the right to upbringing, discrimination according to beliefs, and the reject to reference to god and transcendence in the preamble on the Charter.

Hearing at the European Parliament (21/03/2001)

Following the adoption of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights by the Council, the Commission and the European Parliament on 8 December 2000, Parliament now wishes to base its analysis of the human rights situation in the European Union during its annual debate on the various rights set out in the Charter. The report which will be submitted in this context should become a reference document with respect to the implementation of Articles 6 and 7 of the Treaty on European Union.

The establishment of the European area of freedom, security and justice also represents a priority, according to the conclusions of the October 1999 Tampere European Council. The creation of this area is indissociable from respect for fundamental rights, as is clear from the Preamble to the Charter. It involves:

- the application of a common policy on freedom of movement, asylum and immigration;
- the strengthening of judicial co-operation in civil matters in order to overcome the problems still posed by legal borders in the interest of European citizens, and the strengthening of judicial and police co-operation in criminal matters in order to combat crime more effectively and improve people's security.

White Paper for European Governance

In June 2001, the European Commission launched a White paper on European Governance. It stated that: " Democratic institutions and the representatives of the people, at both national and European levels, can and must try to connect Europe with its citizens. This is the starting condition for more effective and relevant policies. The White Paper proposes opening up the policy-making process to get more people and organisations involved in shaping and delivering EU policy. The paper also launches a consultative process which will run until the end of March 2002 on the need for action by the other Institutions and Member States. By the end of 2002, the Commission will report on the progress it has made and draw lessons from the White Paper consultation."

EHF was contributing to the White paper in sending some basic principles for building a democratic and humanist society in Europe.

European Union foundations

The values

It is proposed to complete the White Paper by the following text :

“ The Union is based on values, the rule of law and political goals ”.

The main values are : dignity, liberties, equality, solidarity, citizenship and justice, as set out in the European Charter of Fundamental Rights (2001), the Amsterdam Treaty (1999) and the European Convention on Human Rights (1951).

Reinforcing the rule of law

Good governance is dependent on reinforcing the rule of law through the following initiatives:

- 1) The setting up in the member States of a network of “ citizens’ chambers ”, accessible to all citizens and legal persons, where they could express their aspirations for the improvement of their quality of life. For reasons of vicinity and accessibility, this network should be as dense as possible
- 2) The setting up of neighbourhood councils in towns, thus reinforcing the citizens’ participation in local public life
- 3) Creating or multiplying in member States ombudsmen trained in European law and in the subsidiarity principle in order to deal in an efficient way with citizens’ complaints on the implementation of Community law. For reasons of vicinity and accessibility, their network should be as dense as possible
- 4) Setting up an appeal chamber to deal with cases not solved at the level of the ombudsmen, and enhance European law through its jurisprudence

According to the Laeken Declaration, the Praesidium will prepare the work of the Convention on the Future of Europe by drawing the lessons from the public debate.

- 5) Drawing up an inventory of the reservations attached to the Treaties at the time of their ratification, in order to assess their usefulness or counter-productivity from the point of view of the quality of the rule of law.

A substantial weakness of the Community system lies in the link between democratic suffrage and the authority entrusted with submitting proposals at European level.

In order to develop a European citizenship, a democratic European public space must be created, and be assured by preserving the independence of mass media.

Citizens consider that too many things are settled without their knowledge and wish a more efficient democratic control and a better implementation of essential values.

In order to prevent a loss of democratic credibility on the part of Community institutions, of which the European Parliament is the only one to be based on a direct democratic legitimacy, the Union's goal should consist of creating a full democratic system at European level.

Civil society

A link between politics and citizen

Life within associations encompasses many topics and can therefore act as a driving force for collective aspirations.

Democracy by participation does not boil down anymore to giving a blank cheque to politicians for the period in between two elections. Besides, the electoral platforms do not normally tackle in detail many of the questions which arise between elections.

Civil society plays a dual role in this respect : while acting as a useful relay towards the political class, without trying to act as a substitute, it thus contributes to sustain and develop an active citizenship.

It thus becomes possible to rehabilitate the role of politics in democracy, whilst getting the citizen more involved into the development of society.

The civil society's actors

According to the mandate of the Economic and Social Committee, the organised civil society comprises social partners, socio-economic circles, NGO's, grassroot organisations and religious communities.

Life within associations encompasses many subjects which are not necessarily of interest to the traditional social partners. It is desirable to make a clear distinction between social partners and non state or non economic associations relying on volunteers.

Since the Delors presidency, the Commission has wanted to establish contacts with Churches. The White Paper is echoing this concern in the following terms " *Churches and religious communities have a specific contribution to make* ".

The White Paper draws a blank in this respect, as its editors did not deem fit to mention the contributions of non confessional associations.

In recent years, a distinction has arisen between the Churches on the one hand, and the "communities of faith and conviction" on the other hand. The latter offer a dialogue opportunity between partners of confessional and non confessional convictions

In the future, it will be necessary to draw a clear distinction between social partners and non state and/or non economic associations constituted on a voluntary basis on the one Churches and "communities of faith and conviction" on the other hand

In order to avoid the above confusions, the brief of the Economic and Social Committee, as set out by article 257 of the Treaty on the European Union, should be amended accordingly.

The contribution of the Churches

Religions and Churches are supposed to bring added value to the Union by shaping conscience, and thus citizenship. One may wonder about this role given solely to the Churches by the European Commission, whereas a majority of citizens are no more regular churchgoers and do not follow anymore the teachings proper to Churches. Furthermore, it should be remembered that democratic States draw their legitimacy and their sovereignty from their citizens.

But, if in order to find itself a proper legitimacy, the State invokes religion and looks for religious legitimacy, it is undermining the legitimacy of the sovereign nation.

The Union cannot engage in this way.

From their side, Churches deliver to the faithful a message based on transcendence.

Consequently, their "specific contribution" does not concern the whole of the population.

It is not the role of governments or European Union to interfere in these matters, as they are committed to respect religious freedom; likewise they cannot introduce a discrimination between the convictions of citizens who believe in heaven, and those who do not.

On the other hand, the White Paper would be well inspired by inviting Churches to promote a dialogue between themselves, to abandon every proselytism, and to avoid having recourse to the concept of religious identity, which is still nurturing/underpinning so many conflicts.

European institutions do not have to be concerned with the "specific contribution" that Churches can offer the faithful. Religion should not interfere with good governance

The contribution of the "communities of conviction and of faith"

Next to the other associations of civil society, "communities of conviction and of faith" have a specific role to play.

Criteria concerning civil society associations have been worked out at the Economic and Social Committee, in order to reflect: "*the expression of the will of citizens*", they have to be constituted "*on a voluntary basis.....via a democratic process*".

It is not conceivable that the Commission or the European Parliament would establish institutional relationships with communities of conviction and of faith not responding the various criteria referred to above.

A large number of civil society associations, among which the humanist associations, intervene in a responsible way in public life on important society questions. Their positions respond in many cases to the search for the meaning of life by the majority of European citizens, whether they concern the family, divorce, contraception and abortion, role of women, end of life, tolerance and freedom of conscience, or peace in the world.

People with no religious beliefs nevertheless develop convictions of their own which are as important and respectable as those of the "believers".

As a consequence, their contribution cannot be neglected and must be able to express itself on an equal footing with that of communities of religious conviction. The various communities of conviction and of faith have to respond to the same representative criteria

Democratically elected partners

Civil society is entitled to demand a direct interlocutor, politically responsible before the European voters, and endowed with the powers every democracy is devolving to its elect. Before the citizen, only democratically elected male and female politicians are responsible to the voters and can be sanctioned by them. Isn't sanction by election the first right of a democratic representation? At the European Union's level, the logic of parliamentary democracy designates the members of the European Parliament and the mandatories nominated by them. The European Parliament has a direct legitimacy and a political responsibility to the European voters whereas the Commission can make proposals within the competencies conferred to it by the Treaties

Consequently, a structured dialogue has to be organised between civil society and the European institutions under the political responsibility of the European Parliament

Eliminate discriminations according to philosophic and religious convictions

Discriminations are observed in numerous member States and candidate countries against various social groups : women, Jews, believers of minority or not recognised religions, but also all those who are not religious, the "non-believers". These discrimination are apparent in education, religious

courses, social aspects, intrusion upon privacy, certain political privileges, official ceremonies with an exclusively religious character, etc.

It is time to realise that a large number of citizens with democratic values and without religious beliefs increasingly consider these discriminations as unacceptable.

Good European governance must ensure that legislation and customs associating Churches and religions in member States are not discriminatory against citizens, notably those who do not adhere to any religion.

Science and society

Education is at the foundation of a living democracy; citizens can only really participate in it via an appropriate training, including civic education

The new information and communication technologies : democratising their access

They are fundamentally rocking our different ways of

- Learning
- Acquiring knowledge
- Reasoning
- Communicating
- Perceiving reality

Hence our behaviour and attitudes, as well as our capacity to act and react to political, economic or social events. At their present development stage, they are in the process of generating a new form of social and cultural exclusion, the "e-exclusion", or digital divide.

If the values founding the European Union are to be preserved (cf. point 1 above), each citizen must be given the means to master these new technologies through adequate training, as well as free access to digital information disseminated by governments, as is the case for the display of traditional public announcements. In the absence of such means, electronic consultation processes will not be considered as instruments of democratic participation, but rather as a discrimination factor between those having both knowledge and access, and those deprived of both.

Likewise, governments/public authorities should prevent and avoid through adequate provisions the rise of dominant or single information or communication technologies, of "tidal wave" type, which would give to certain industries and companies of the private sector an exorbitant power to appropriate and control the communication infrastructure. Through the exclusively private and/or closed character of their property, nature and use, technologies of this type would aim at preventing any other alternative means of transmission and expression of public opinion.

By this effect, they would constitute a direct and clear breach of the principles of a participate democracy, based on freedom and equality of citizens, cornerstones of any good governance.

The White Paper on European governance remains silent on these subjects, as well as on the risks affecting electronic democracy, due to the rapid obsolescence of new technologies, or on the so-called "interactive policy making" with civil society : which interactivity with which representation of civil society ?

The European Humanist Federation requests that certain themes dealt with in previous documents and put aside in the White Paper be taken up again, as encouraging the general acquisition of new knowledge at European level (history, languages, institutions and techniques notably) fighting social exclusion, economic marginalisation and technocratic elitism.

Teaching and learning

They must enable the citizen to apprehend their complexity, while remaining able to connect each science and technology with the whole of the various disciplines during his whole life in order to be capable of understanding and effectively participating in the choices of concern to him.

This systemic approach of complexity will also have to be followed when it comes to formulating education and scientific training policies in Europe and drafting Commission proposals in this area.

Citizens' relation to science

Science, which so substantially contributed to freeing individuals, cannot surreptitiously become a means of restricting their freedom by the emergence of some monopolies of knowledge and technology

The right to information being a general principle in democracy, it is particularly relevant to materialise it in the area of science and society. The bodies entrusted with assessing scientific and technological options, as they exist in both European and national parliaments, should consult, as a rule, socio-economic partners as well as representatives of the organised civil society, not only at the examination and discussion stages, but also when drafting conclusions. Final decisions will naturally remain with politicians.

The European Humanist Federation notes that in its Communication of 4 December 2001, the Commission limits itself to enumerating a series of actions, whilst remaining silent on the political choices implied by scientific and technological activities. Exploiting their results with only their economic profitability in mind while discounting their ethical and social implications, may strip away the principles on which good governance is based via the appropriation of the ownership of research by a small group of very powerful enterprises.

The increasingly preponderant part played by technologies in the private appropriation and exploitation of scientific knowledge must be questioned, as well as the part played by computer science and software in the automation of making available and implementing technical knowledge. Presently these questions are relentlessly discussed by parties not sharing the same options. Stakes are considerable and sometimes disquieting, to the extent certain industrial options truly compromise the public ownership of a growing share of human knowledge.

In order to make the citizens duly aware of the stakes involved, the Commission should make a distinction in its proposals between, on the one hand the stakes related to the acquisition of knowledge (notably scientific knowledge), and on the other hand their use and applications list all communication channels likely to report on scientific and technological achievements, as well as on their likely economic, ethical and philosophical implications.

Precaution and responsibility principles

Politicians, scientists and experts fundamentally differ in their way of tackling problems. The complexity of the debate is notably related to:

- the knowledge explosion
- the management of scientific uncertainty and risks
- the implementation of the precaution principle

flowing from it

- Directly concerned by the above, civil society can pass on the elements of the debate to its members

- start the process leading to decisions by signalling to politicians in charge problems or new risks which have escaped their attention

- offer complementary opinions from the citizens' angle

Responsibility principle

The complexity characterising questions related to science and society has to be taken into account both in its causes and its effects, at short, medium and long term. The decisions called for by these questions must result from enlightened choices, made in the light of state of the art knowledge. If the final responsibility for these choices clearly rests with the politicians, this responsibility has to

be shared at all stages preceding the decision with all actors concerned, scientists, researchers and teachers, including civil society.

Besides, all consequences resulting from the implementation of a scientific and technical process must be taken into account, in order to equitably share its benefits, risks and nuisances between its owners, those in charge of its implementation, and the end users of the product. The recent discussions and controversies around the GMOs, the patentability of life or the global warming clearly show the imperative need to set up at all political levels in Europe the democratic framework of a governance clearly taking these principles on board.

If the debate and the stakes are to become truly transparent and democratic, and the precaution and responsibility principles to be effectively implemented, civil society must be associated from the outset.

Role of the experts

The use of scientific expertise should explicitly refer back to a statute defining clearly their assignment and their role at the various levels the experts are called upon. Following the example set by the European reflection Group on Ethics, such a statute should be democratically accessible. This would usefully complete the Commission draft guidelines for the use of expertise at Community level, to which civil society should also be associated.

General interest must prevail over any particular interest or partisan view. Assessments conducted by means of public funds, as well as their conclusions, must be made accessible to the citizen.

Role of public sector in reinforcing social cohesion

The White Paper doesn't take duly into account the role of this key sector comprising services and enterprises, and its demographic dimension: within national economies it ranks indeed among the largest employers and service providers.

The principle of social cohesion, already enshrined in the Treaties and materialised by the EU's Cohesion Fund, lies at the heart of good governance, which can only produce its effects in a solid democracy. If social fracture is to be prevented or minimised, services of general interest should be given their due importance versus market forces. This is only possible through a public sector capable of balancing the market forces by assuring the basic services to which all citizens must have access without distinction.

Consequently, it is convenient

- to draw up a clear definition of the services of general interest to be assured
- to set up a European network of these services, enabling their role to be subsequently enhanced
- to reinforce the role of this sector in the decision making process by endowing the enterprise committees with a social and economic observatory

The latter will be entrusted with assessing

- the quality of life of an often considerable number of staff
- the satisfaction of the needs of the citizens-users
- the evolution required to enable the enterprises to keep playing efficiently its role at national, European and even world level
- establishing an annual social account of the situation of the public sector and the state of social cohesion within the EU

A substantial part of these concerns is covered by the draft Charter of Services of General Interest, presented in June 2001 by CEEP (Centre Européen des Entreprises à Participation Publique et des Entreprises d'Intérêt Economique Général / European Centre of Enterprises with Public Participation and of Enterprises of General Economic Interest).

Five lines of action to reinforce direct (close to the people) democracy

In its contribution to the White Paper on European Governance, the European Humanist Federation, concerned with the reinforcement of close to the people democracy, has successively dealt with the Union's values, the role of European ombudsmen, of civil society, education and scientific training and of the public sector in bringing the Union nearer to its citizens, so as to be more receptive to their expectations and to treat them as actors rather than as simple subjects of law.

By opening new communication and participation channels, good governance thus implemented will ensure the effectiveness of the values on which the European Union is supposed to be based.

Convention "For the future of Europe"

God in the preamble of the treaty

The elaboration of a Constitution for the European Union is widely talked about. It has been asked to have in it a reference to god to allow "the identification of the citizens with the values of the European Union".

To ask to write in the preamble of the future Constitution of the Union the reference to god is not a unifying step and is discriminatory against the more and more numerous citizens who do not follow any religious precepts.

Let us recall that the persons who do have any religion develop convictions as much respectable as those of "believers".

The reference to god or to a religious tradition is perfectly inappropriate for, 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".

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 Germany 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 documents which will concern all the citizens of Europe in the 21st century.

It would be advisable to avoid the evocation of heritages and references 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 Charter of Fundamental Rights, "the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion".

Let us remark 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.

Moreover, one has to remember that democratic states draw their legitimacy and their sovereignty from the citizens. If, in order to forge a legitimacy of its own, the European Union appeals to religion and seeks some form of recognition by the Churches, it is undermining the legitimacy of the sovereign people.

Improving the relation with the citizen

One of the fundamental issues that the European Union has to deal with at present and which is found in numerous documents is how to improve the relation with the citizens.

It is only if the citizens sense that their concerns and expectations are taken into account that it will be possible for them to become involved or get involved again in the European project.

The European humanist Federation supports the development of civil society organisations within the Union and as a consequence of democracy by participation.

The activities of civil society organisations are a driving force in developing projects affecting the entire society.

It is no longer sufficient for democracy by participation to give politicians a blank cheque in between two elections.

In this respect, civil society plays a dual role : to act as a useful relay to the political world without trying to substitute it and so to maintain and develop an active citizenship.

In the context of the relation between the citizen and the institutions of the Union, the question of the place of churches and communities of faith and conviction arises.

Dialogue

Dialogue today is on the agenda and is about getting to know and listening to one another and getting rid of the barriers of prejudice and misunderstandings. There are examples of publications managed by an editorial board composed of Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Humanists and Buddhists. Their aim is “to confront different visions of society and ethics, to understand better the nature of the latter in mutual respect for the bearers of these ideals and to progress together in organising society”.

One can see everywhere that Europe is trying to open itself to dialogue. Dialogue between cultures, ecumenical dialogue between religions and between churches, dialogue between the personal convictions of believers in god who are opening up to dialogue with atheists and agnostics.

People must talk to each other, religions must talk to each other, cultures must talk to each other. The organisations of civil society can respond to this approach.

Communities of faith and conviction

In recent years, a distinction has arisen between the Churches on the one hand, and the “communities of faith and conviction” on the other hand. It is more within the latter that partners of confessional and non-confessional convictions have often undertaken to enter into dialogue. No longer, as often in the past, by uselessly confronting each other, but with the shared goodwill to mutually understand one another.

What have been called “communities” for lack of a better word, are most often associations or informal groups open to persons of dialogue.

“Communities of faith and conviction” have their place next to the other organisations of civil society.

The Economic and Social Committee has drawn up criteria concerning civil society organisation which, in order to reflect : “*the expression of the will of the citizens*”, have to be constituted “*on a voluntary basis ... via a democratic process*”.

It is obvious that in the same way as the organisations of civil society, communities of faith and conviction must meet these requirements.

A large number of civil society organisations, among which the humanist organisations, intervene in a responsible way in public life on major society issues. Most of them are organised in very democratic way. The positions of quite many of them respond to the search for the meaning of life of the majority of the European citizens, whether regarding the family, divorce, contraception and

abortion, the role of women, the end of life, tolerance and freedom of conscience, or peace in the world.

Their “contribution” must not be neglected and must be able to be expressed on an equal footing with that of the communities of religious conviction which are democratically organised.

The message of the Churches

Since the Delors presidency, the Commission has wanted to establish contacts with the Churches. The White Paper on European Governance is echoing this concern and asserts that : “*The Churches and religious communities have a specific contribution to make.*”

In this respect, there is something missing in the White Paper as the editors did not deem fit to mention the contributions of the non-confessional organisations.

Religions and churches want to bring added value to the Union through the shaping of conscience and thus of citizenship, by delivering a “message” which schematically on two levels : one part being based upon transcendence from which comes the other part consisting of the rules of life.

On its side, the Commission pursues its project of “consolidating the peoples’ union”

One may wonder about this particular role devolved by the European Commission only to the Churches whereas the majority of citizens no longer practice their faith. Likewise, they no longer comply with the positions of the churches concerning everyone’s conduct in matters related to family, marriage and free union, divorce, abortion and contraception, bio-ethics, etc...

It is not an attack against religious convictions to note that, in many areas, the rules of life and the codes of conduct in society advocated by the Churches no longer constitute models followed and shared by many citizens.

Due to their loss of audience, their diversity and sometimes competition amongst themselves, these models are no longer really shared today and have lost de facto any claim to “consolidate the peoples’ union”. This is particularly striking in matters related to the rights of women, of homosexuals, to all aspects of sexuality and reproduction.

These persons who no longer comply with the religious instructions nevertheless develop convictions of their own as respectable as those of “believers” and often with much strictness.

Not only the churches and the religions have lost the monopoly on values, but one can measure the discrepancy between the positions by taking for example the fight against Aids. On one side, the use of condoms is forbidden and on the other, on the contrary, there are campaigns for its use by numerous international institutions supported by the majority of the population.

To grant Churches a particular status among the European institutions would be tantamount to creating a discrimination between the convictions of the citizens who believe in heaven and those who do not.

The Churches deliver to their believers a religious message based on transcendence which has to be respected. Every church has somehow the monopoly of its message and of a word on its own believers. The “specific contributions” of each of them do not address the entire population but only the particular believers.

The dialogue that the European institutions want to establish with the Churches cannot express a judgement on, or question the content, the value or the foundations of the opinions and convictions of these communities.

The public authorities and the European Union do not have to intervene in these strictly religious matters, as they have to respect the religious liberty as part and parcel of the liberty of conscience.

Finally, within the Churches themselves and of course out of them, many people reject the using of religion to use the power of the State in order to have the earthly message of the Churches prevail.

Here it is the role of religion in the making of policies and in the taking of decisions by the Union which is questioned.

The Union would step back more two centuries by not taking into account the evolution of the way people think in relation to this issue.

Let us note that the European Union results from an economic and political integration deprived of any religious dimension. The religious convictions are not a matter covered by the Treaties; hence they do not fall under the Community competencies.

The European institutions are not concerned by the “specific contribution” that the churches can give to their believers. EHF is opposed to the intention of mixing again religion and governance.

But the Union can invite 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. Likewise, pursuing to open up a dialogue between persons with religious convictions and atheists or agnostics should be much encouraged.

Such an undertaking can certainly find its place in an initiative such as “A Soul for Europe”.

No discrimination according to philosophical and religious convictions

Let us note that in many member states of the Union and in countries applicant to the enlargement, discriminations are observed against various social groups : women, believers of minority or non recognised religions, but above all against all those who are not religious, against the “non-believers”.

These discriminations are apparent in education, religious courses, social field, intrusion upon privacy, certain political privileges, official ceremonies with an exclusively religious character, etc...

It is time to realise that a large number of citizens with democratic values and without religion increasingly consider these discriminations as unacceptable.

Within the Union, the insertion of a reference to god in the Charter of Fundamental Rights as well as in the future Constitution of the Union would introduce a serious discrimination against the non-religious part of the population.

It is regrettable that the legislation and the practice involving the Churches and the religions in the countries of the Union and in countries applicant to the enlargement are still of a discriminatory nature against the citizens and in particular against those who do not have a religion.

Statement on Secularism in Europe (Rome 9/02/2002)

In the last few months there have been a number of requests suggesting that the new constitutional arrangements of the European Union should make explicit reference to the Christian cultural heritage of our continent.

Such reference would exclude those Europeans that do not identify with that religious tradition or indeed with any other; in fact, it would be all the more exclusive if general criteria for the interpretation of European laws and treaties were to be inferred from it.

We also believe that the texts of laws and constitutions are not the right forum for defining labels that may reflect the composite historical and cultural identity of Europe, an identity that can be preserved and enriched only through unfettered public debate and free research and through the evolution of civil awareness.

Any statement seeking to authoritatively replace such free debate, hampering and limiting it by a political decision adopted by governments or by a majority vote, would deal a heavy blow to European cultural values and traditions.

We believe it is necessary that the principle ensuring strictly secular institutions should be enshrined in the future constitutional arrangements of the European Union. As a matter of fact, the equal dignity of all citizens, the full respect for the freedom of religion and conscience as well as for the identity of each individual are only possible where public institutions remain absolutely neutral in their attitude to people's beliefs. These are the freedoms that are the most valuable and distinctive feature of Europe's civil and cultural heritage.

Furthermore, as Europe's society is becoming ever more secularised, granting privileges or primacy to one or more denominations would encourage the bad habit of concordats and agreements and pave the way to explosive conflicts in the near future.

Only by clearly enshrining the secular nature of institutions can discrimination and heavy-handed claims on hegemony over people's minds be avoided.

Humanism and secularism in Europe

Paragraphs 1 and 2 of article 37 incorporate declaration 11, which was adopted outside the treaty in 1997 in Amsterdam. Once this text will be included, the European Union will not be able to take measures concerning discriminatory practices in favour of the churches. These practices are very common in the majority of the European countries and especially in the new member states who have recently signed a Concordat with the Vatican.. This article's sole purpose is to block any evolution in the status of the churches in the U.E.

The non-confessional organisations, that have a democratic structure, can not lose any advantages as most of these don't have or just a fraction of the subventions the churches can count on.

The third paragraph acknowledges the churches a privileged and 'regular dialogue' with the Union due to their "identity" and "specific contribution" even though article 34 grants 'an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society'.

Every church believes that has the Truth, and while it is perfectly lawful for them to direct their transcendental message to their own believers, it is unacceptable that such a message should be enshrined in a legal institutional document like the European Constitution. If our Constitution were to recognise that, on account of their religious identity, the churches have a specific contribution to make to the democratic process, this would be tantamount to acknowledging that the source of law lies outside Parliament.

A precedent would be created when this article would be accepted: for the first time the Union's treaty would concern churches and religion. It would only be a matter of time for the first direct and official interventions of the churches in the Union's politics concerning several topics of the social life like IVF, euthanasia, contraception, family issues, the situation of women, biomedical researches, divorce, education,....

163 members of the European Parliament have just signed a Draft resolution for the respect of the principles of religious freedom and the secular nature of the state in the future European Constitution, recalling that "the principles of the secular nature of the state, the quality and non-discrimination between citizens, and hence between different religions and churches, lie at the basis of democracy and the rule of law."

The European Humanist Federation and all people and associations defending the principle of secularism of the public institutions and the separation of state and church are appalled by the proposition for article 37 and demand the withdrawal.

For the withdrawal of article 37, an appeal to the Convention

The future European Constitution has given rise to an extraordinary lobbying campaign by the Churches and particularly by the Roman Catholic Church in order to reassess in their favour the relations between the public institutions and the religious institutions. To this end, article 52 (ex 37) of the draft Constitutional Treaty aims at organising a dialogue and a regular consultation with the Churches.

The Churches strategy is not only to ask for the recognition of the contribution of Christian values to the European civilisation. They aim at institutionalising a privileged place for the Church in the consultation processes instituted by the organs of the Union that would thus recognise for them the right to exercise a magisterial influence.

This is what clearly results from paragraph 3 of article 52 (ex 37).

These measures constitute an important regression and are contrary to the principles of secularism and of neutrality of public Institutions. Governance and religion should not be mixed.

The five organisations IPPF European Network, Réseau européen "Eglises de liberté", Right to Die in Europe, Ligue européenne de l'Enseignement and the European Humanist Federation have launched the following appeal to Convention demanding the withdrawal of article 52.

The appeal is supported by more than 180 networks and organisations of most of the countries of the Union, representing several million citizens, as well as by a very large number of private persons.

The following signatory associations, active in all European countries, congratulate the Convention on the Future of Europe for proposing guarantees for the functioning of participatory democracy in Title VI.

In this spirit, our associations call for the future European Constitution not to pose any obstacle to the right of individuals to make free decisions concerning their lifestyles and personal choices on all questions linked to human existence.

The signatory associations are concerned about preserving and continuing to develop the gains acquired in their various fields of activity, be it in the field of education, morality, family and the condition of women, contraception, abortion, euthanasia, divorce or sexual orientation, etc...

The signatory associations note that article 52 provides Churches with a right to regular intervention into the policy-making of the European Union, thus allowing them to assert their religious options on matters listed above and many others such as discrimination against women, homosexuals, the fight against HIV/AIDS or on issues related to biomedical research.

The separation of Church and State must apply to all areas of community life.

The signatory associations therefore launch a solemn appeal to all members of the Convention regardless of their philosophical or religious convictions to request the withdrawal of the entirety of Article 52.

Democratic life in the Union

The European humanist federation has noticed with satisfaction that articles 33 to 36 of the draft of the European Constitution lay down the representative character of democracy. On the other hand discrimination and privileges are established within the organised civil society. These privileges are a violation of the separation between churches and state as well as a violation of the principle of equality of the citizens.

The European humanist federation respects the "specific contribution" that churches address to their faithful but stresses that this contribution does not concern the whole of the population. The majority of Europeans does not follow Churches' instructions any more to guide their steps and choices in their lives, both spiritual and otherwise.

The Constitution of the Union cannot grant the Churches a "regular dialogue" with the institutions of the Union because the democratic participation of the citizens of the Union is not expressed through the Churches. Hence they should not be accorded a preferential treatment. The European humanist federation wishes to stress that article 34 allows the various representative communities of faith and convictions " to make known and publicly exchange their opinions on all areas of Union action".

The European humanist federation asks the Convention once more, not to mix up religion and governance and therefore demands the withdrawal of article 37. This article goes against an open and democratic functioning of the Union as a transparent and representative body of the will of its citizens.

18/04/2003

Council of ministers and the Treaty

Campaign for withdrawal of article 52

Your association responded, along with many others, to the appeal five European networks (*) launched last June calling for the withdrawal of article 51 of the draft European Constitution.

The President of the Convention, Valéry Giscard D'Estaing, did not present this article for discussion and our request was not examined.

Now, the draft Constitution is in the hands of the EU Council of Ministers which will engage in further debates with a view to come to a common agreement on the draft Constitution by the end of 2003. We should not forget that these Ministers are all members of the national governments of EU Member States.

With this in mind, we would like to call upon all organisations which have signed the appeal to write to the Ministers of your country to express your wish to have article 51 withdrawn from the draft Constitution.

You will find in attachment, a list of addresses and names of ministers of your country.

(*) IPPF European network, Réseau européen "Églises de liberté", Fédération humaniste européenne, Right to die in Europe, Ligue européenne de l'enseignement

Draft Letter for your association to send

Hon. Prime Minister
Hon. Minister for Foreign Affairs

Sir/ Madam,

RE : Draft European Constitution

At this time when the draft European Constitution is being examined by the Governments of the EU Member States, we would like to call upon you to ensure that our Government adopts a position which would seek to unite all European citizens rather than adopt a divisive position which would refer to a specific religion. In this respect, the suggestion of the Convention referring to "cultural, religious and secular heritage of Europe" seem very well adapted to this purpose.

In addition, we would like to emphasise our request for the withdrawal of article 51 which would institutionalise a rights for certain religions to interfere in the decision making processes of the European Institutions in matters relating to individual rights. You will find in annex an explanatory note on the consequences of the adoption of article 51.

Yours faithfully,

What is at stake ?

Article 51 calls for religions to be guaranteed regular contacts with the European Institutions. There is no reason to provide religions (the non-religious communities are NOT asking for any privilege) a specific and privileged status which is distinct from the relationship suggested for all organisations representing civil society as established in article 46 of the draft Constitution.

But above all, we would like to emphasise that the separation of Churches and State is a cornerstone of European democracy. The neutrality of the State with regard to spiritual beliefs and commitments is the only guarantee of religious freedom and freedom of thought. No religion or religious group should be able to impose upon the whole of society its own conceptions of social life and organisation.

The primary objective expressed by representatives of Christian religions is the recognition that religion is a part of political discussion.

In this respect, Churches have requested the establishment of a pre-legislative consultation procedure by means of regular dialogue seminars with the advisors to the President of the Commission. They further suggest holding working sessions on specific issues in draft legislation as well as presidential-level meetings between the President of the Commission and high level representatives of the Churches. Finally, to achieve the above, these same Christian representatives would seek to establish a small liaison office within the services of the European Commission.

The positions of many religions on abortion, voluntary euthanasia, divorce, family, biomedical research (embryonic, human stem cell...), equality between women and men, same-sex partnerships, contraception are all well known.

While these religions have every right to set their own expectations for the behaviour of their members, it is not acceptable that they should impose these on all people within the framework of a privileged dialogue with the European Institutions.

Along with many others, we have fought for the right for every individual to freely choose how to live their life and express their personal choices on such fundamental questions.

Appeal to Decision-Makers on the future EU Constitution

A meeting with Members of the European Parliament concerning Article 51 entitled "The Intervention of the Churches in the European Union" took place on 3 December 2003 in the European Parliament. The concern of many organisations, NGOs and European networks present is to avoid that one single current of thinking, in this case represented by the Christian hierarchies, obtains a privileged status with the institutions of the EU.

A letter of the COMECE and the KEK of June 2002 addressed to the Group of Policy Advisors to Commission President Prodi in fact calls for the right of Churches to intervene in the Union's "pre-legislative" process.

Under the guise of a dialogue, Article 51 institutionalises a right of interference granted to the Churches in matters under the competence of EU Institutions. It will allow the Churches to create within the EU a status similar to that the Vatican enjoys in the UN.

The Vatican uses its voice in the UN to limit access to family planning and safe abortion. The Vatican obstructs progress on issues concerning sexual orientation and divorce, as well as promotes its own moral ideology such as abstinence as the only contraceptive method for young people, leading to the well-documented consequences regarding the spread of HIV/AIDS and unwanted

pregnancies among adolescents. This is complemented by attempts to subordinate women's rights to religious convictions.

In Europe, the great majority of citizens do not follow the positions promoted by the Vatican and wish to make free and informed choices regarding their lifestyle.

For this reason the signatory organisations, active in a number of fields in society, demand the withdrawal of Article 51. Indeed, dialogue between the EU Institutions and all parts of civil society, regardless of their philosophical or religious convictions, should be guaranteed by Article 46.

These organisations represent a broad spectrum of pluralist, secular and Christian attitudes and convictions and are all united by the respect for freedom of thought, conscience and religion as well as to freedom of expression of individuals and associations.

The signatory associations hereby launch a solemn call to action to all national and European decision-makers:

- to listen to democratic civil society
- to reject anachronistic models whereby the Churches may impose their positions on society at large
- to reject Article 51 as it does not correspond to the expectations of civil society in the 21st century
- to establish a dialogue with all components of European society without any privilege for religious hierarchies.

International Planned Parenthood Federation/Réseau européen (IPPF), Catholics for a Free Choice/ Europe, Fédération Humaniste Européenne (FHE), Réseau européen Eglise de Liberté, Right to Die Europe, European Region of the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA-Europe), Association des femmes de l'Europe méridionale (AFEM), Fédération européenne de l'éducation et de la culture (FEEC).

Brussels, December 3, 2003

Why article 51 ?

A coalition of pluralistic, catholic and humanist NGO's demanding the withdrawal of article 51 from the draft European Constitution organised a press conference on 5 November 2003, in the European Parliament, in order to inform the general public, the media as well as the members of the European Parliament.

Olga Zrihen, Belgian European MP, Georges Liénard, General Secretary of the European Humanist Federation, Neil Datta, Co-ordinator at the International Planned Parenthood Federation/European Network, and Elfriede Harth, Representative of Catholics for a Free Choice/ Europe and of the European Network Church on the Move spoke.

Article I-51 establishing "*an open, transparent and regular dialogue with the Churches and organisations*" (philosophical and non-confessional) was never discussed and was forwarded to the European Council of Ministers. However, numerous members of the Convention had presented amendments calling for the withdrawal of this Article.

The aim and the nature of this 'dialogue' as suggested by the Churches (as per a note of June 2002 from the COMECE/KEK) specifically calls for:

the establishment of a 'pre-legislative' consultation procedure by means of seminars with advisers to the President of the Commission

regular work-sessions on specific themes of draft legislation which are of particular interest or concern for the Churches

ad hoc working meetings between the President of the Commission and high level representatives of the Churches

a liaison office within the very premises of the Commission with the aim of fostering a 'partnership' with the Commission

Separation of Church and State

The Vatican has used its position in the UN system to limit access to family planning and safe abortion. It also obstructs progress and debate on issues such as sexual orientation and divorce as well as abuses its influence to promote abstinence as the only 'contraceptive' choice for young people, thus contributing to the dramatic spread of HIV/AIDS and unwanted pregnancies among young people. In addition, the Vatican has often sought to place religious convictions above women's rights.

These examples speak for themselves in proving the need to separate religion from politics in the European Union. With Article 51 the Churches are in effect expecting to create a situation in the EU similar to that which the Vatican enjoys in the UN.

Numerous individuals as well as religious, pluralist and secular organisations have written letters to the Ministers of their countries insisting that Article 51 be withdrawn.

The letters specifically point to "Article 51 as institutionalising the right of Churches to interfere in the Institutions of the EU. The neutrality of the State with regard to spiritual beliefs and commitments is the only guarantee of religious freedom and freedom of thought. No religion or religious group should be able to impose upon the whole of society its own conceptions of social life and organisation. "

6 November 2003

The church's strategy

First step

In March 1996, during the preparation of the Intergovernmental Conference of Turin, a note was given to the ambassadors of E.U. countries accredited to the State of the Holy See.

The Holy See declares that the following objectives should be reached :

- emphasise the contribution of the Churches and religions to the development of Europe
- maintain the relations between the Churches and the States as they are within the Member States
- avoid that one system of relations between Church and State could supplant another
- root the relations between Church and State in the Community Law
- avoid any discrimination against Churches and religions with regard to other social movements already appreciated on a Community level
- protect the competence of States in their present relations with Churches and religions.

This document was not taken into consideration by the European Council of Ministers on the grounds that the Holy See was not part of the European Union.

Second step

Some time later, the delegations of three Member States of the European Union (Germany on one side, Italy and Austria on another side), followed by Portugal, introduced to the Dutch Presidency of the Union a proposition to include into the Rome Treaty, during the Amsterdam IGC of 1997, a specific mention of the place of the Churches in the European cultural heritage and of their own particular status.

Article F "Fundamental Rights", according to his proposition, should have been completed as follows:

"The Union shall respect the constitutional status of religious communities in the Member States as a manifestation of the identity of the Member States and their cultures and as part of the common cultural heritage."

The Intergovernmental Conference adopted, not an addition to Article F of the fundamental rights, as suggested by the four member countries, but a "declaration to be inserted into the final act": (declaration 11)

"The Union respects and does not prejudice the status under national law of the churches and religious associations or communities in the Member States".

But for good measure and to avoid any indignant reactions, there was an addition to the declaration *"The Union equally respects the status of philosophical and non-confessional organisations"*.

Third step

President Prodi creates the GOPA (Group of policy advisors to the President), a team of diplomats, charged with the regulation of the future relations between the Churches and the European Institutions.

The GOPA asked certain Churches to submit, before the end of June 2002, proposals in order to establish "a structured dialogue between the Churches, religious communities and the European Commission".

In a contribution of the secretariat of the COMECE to the debate on the future of the European Union during the European Convention (21 May 2002), one can read :

"The Treaty should also allow for the possibility of a structured dialogue between the European Institutions and the Churches and religious communities."

In June 2002, the response of the COMECE and of the KEK was addressed to Dr. Weninger of the GOPA. The objective of the Churches, in this document (COMECE /KEK of June 2002), is very precise and aims at organising :

A pre-legislative consultation procedure by seminars with policy advisors to the President of the Commission.

Regular working sessions on specific objectives set up on issues about which the Churches have a particular concern or an interest in draft legislation.

Occasional presidential-level meetings between the President of the European Commission and high level representatives of the Churches.

A liaison office within the services of the Commission, in order to develop a "partnership" with the Commission.

This text allows one to understand the sense of the word "dialogue" used in Article 51 (now 52).

Article 51 : Status of churches and non-confessional organisations

1. The European Union respects and does not prejudice the status under national law of churches and religious associations or communities in the Member States.
2. The European Union equally respects the status of philosophical and non-confessional organisations.
3. Recognising their identity and their specific contribution, the Union shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with these churches and organisations,

It institutionalises the right for Churches to interfere in the institutions of the Union and answers the request of the Vatican of 1996. With Article 51, the Churches demand the creation in the European Union of a situation similar to the one enjoyed by the Vatican in the United Nations.

Only the neutrality of the State with regard to spiritual beliefs and commitments is the guarantee of religious freedom and of freedom of thought. No Church and no religious group is entitled to impose its own conceptions upon the whole of society.

That is why numerous individuals as well as religious, pluralist and humanist organisations demand that Article 51 be deleted.

November 2003

European Parliament

Memento for the European election (June 2004)

EHF was preparing this memento for the European election with a view to help its member to organise a campaign using all or some of the topics mentioned in the document.

XX was to be replaced by the name of the organisation.

Introduction

XX is a member of the European Humanist Federation (EHF), an non-profit international organisation under Belgian law, created in 1991. Its main aim is to represent its members and to promote the principles of humanism and secularism of society to the European institutions.

XX supports and forwards the actions and demands of EHF.

XX considers that the building of a democratic Europe implies the neutrality of the European institutions and their strict impartiality with regard to all the citizens, whatever their religious or philosophical convictions. XX watches closely the evolution of the European Union particularly what concerns the issues related to citizenship, non-discrimination between person, human rights, ethics, development co-operation, freedom and the separation between Churches and European institutions.

Our actions are guided by the concern to see developed in the European Union participative democracy, tolerance between the different life stances as well as equal rights for citizens whatever their religious or philosophical convictions. With EHF XX campaigns against nationalism, for the respect of human rights, for a humanist moral approach based on responsibility and civil and social solidarity, and for philosophical pluralism.

European convention on human rights

XX wants the European Union to adhere to the European Convention on Human Rights. The adhesion should go with the recognition of the compulsory jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights and of the right to petition a judge individually. Such a system would allow the control by a judge not part of the Community juridical order, of the compatibility of Community Law with the European Convention on Human Rights.

European constitution

XX wants the European Constitution to go beyond ancient divisions and to avoid the evocation of heritages that divide. XX asks that :

- it be explicitly mentioned in the constitutional text that *the Union is founded 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.*
- explicit guarantees of secularism be integrated into the Treaties and measures governing the European Union.

Such guarantees concern more particularly the following fields :

- Separation between Churches and the European institutions
- Status of the Churches
- Equality of rights – subsidiarity principle
- Adhesion of new Member States
- Immigration and asylum policy
- Europe, vector of peace
- Foreign policy

Separation between Churches and the European institutions

XX stresses the role that public power has to play with regard to separation between Churches and European institutions which must be impartial. Only the pre-eminence of the civil over the religious, of the general public interest over the aspirations of particular ideological groups, can avoid that socio-cultural diversity is translated into a juxtaposition of ghettos indifferent to, conflicting with, or even hostile to one another.

XX demands :

- that Community institutions ensure the total independence of official bodies, of public services and of European legal activities as regards Churches, clergies, confessional influence.
- that Community Law guarantees the exercise of legitimate rights (individual and collective) with regard to religion in the sphere of private life of which they pertain to, without ever interfering with the public and the political sphere.

Status of the Churches

XX considers that article 51 of the draft Constitution of the Union institutionalises the right for Churches to interfere in the legislative and decision-making process of the Union.

To recognise in the draft Constitution such a right to the Churches amounts to grant them a privileged status because of their religious identity and to acknowledge that the Law does not stem from the Parliament.

XX demands the deletion of article 51 from the European Constitution.

Equality of rights – Principle of subsidiarity

A democratic State is characterised by the recognition for each person of a sphere of autonomy that the State must respect and guarantee by all means, and particularly by ensuring an equality of treatment for each person and each particular group.

Philosophical and religious convictions pertain to the private sphere of each citizen, moreover each religion is free to get organised as it wishes.

In application of the Treaty of the Union (Amsterdam 1997) and of article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, the non-discrimination of persons is essential as regards religious or philosophical convictions, whatever they may be.

Freedom of thought, of conscience and of religion is generally guaranteed in the member States. However the equality of treatment with respect to the material means put at the disposal of religious or philosophical organisations by the States is far from being ensured. Nowadays, many European

citizens have adopted a non-confessional life stance whereas most European States still behave as if all the citizens still belonged to a religion.

XX considers that it is not acceptable that the application of the principle of subsidiarity is used to keep on perpetuating such discriminations.

Admission of new Member States

Several member organisations of the European Humanist Federation, in particular in Poland and Slovakia, are worried about the dysfunctional democratic process in their country, mainly due to the intervention of the Catholic Church on all levels of the public institutions.

XX draws the attention of the European institutions and of the Member States to these problems which concern the respect of human rights, freedom, and discriminations mainly against women and persons who are not Catholics.

XX demands that measures be taken immediately to avoid that the admission of certain States to the Union creates new religious conflicts.

Immigration and asylum policy

XX would like to point out the fundamental distinction between immigration and asylum policy. Strongly attached to human rights, XX urges the European Union to take measures with the States of the Union in order to take all steps to ensure that, in a concerted way, at all stages of the reception of the candidates refugees, human dignity is respected.

XX demands:

- that the current immigration policy be re-examined in order to obtain a coherent policy on a European level
- that asylum seekers - in the name of the principle of equality- have at their disposal the means required for the instructions of their applications, under conditions safeguarding the respect of persons and of procedure taking into account real-life situations.
- that the policy of border control be accompanied by the implementation of human and material means suited to the requirements of the respect of the humanist values defended by the States.
- that the immigration and asylum policy be part of a revising of the North-South relations and of a development policy.

Europe, vector of peace

Europe has a long tradition of human rights. The proclamation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights represents a step forward and is further evidence of it.

XX considers that:

- the implementation of a Europe able to make decisions in a democratic way and under a real parliamentary control is the requisite key for its international role for peace. Not to make Europe a bastion isolated from the rest of the world but to render prevailing the values of democracy, tolerance and solidarity without which peace is not possible.
- only a European Union capable of making political decisions while speaking with one voice will be able to intervene to have human rights respected and to make peace reign,

not only in European area but also in the countries of the Mediterranean region with which the European Union has had close relation for a long time.

European foreign policy

Currently, the Union is deprived of any political dimension or influence commensurate with its economic weight. Opinion polls conducted in the Union show that citizens want a strong Union, capable of projecting itself and defending its interests and its values outside of its borders.

A substantive and visible reinforcement of foreign policy and its coherence will provide an answer to that expectation and would incontestably be a factor of pacification in the European area and its immediate environment.

XX considers that in line with the decision to dispose of an operational European rapid deployment force, the Union should endow itself with the instruments of a common foreign policy, commensurate to the Union's importance in Europe and in the world, and capable of securing its cohesion after the enlargement.

Importance of cultural creation

The European Union is in search of a common identity.

There persists a trend to turn to what one calls the "communities of conviction", in particular religions and Churches. However the development of a society as well as the understanding and respectful approach of its various constituents, goes mainly through a cultural project. Such a project is necessary primarily to allow people to get to know their respective sensibilities and thus to understand each other better, even to appreciate, but mainly it constitutes an important factor of social cohesion.

XX considers that it is time for the Union to get provided with an ambitious project, in a spirit of dialogue between the different components of society.

Such a project must aim primarily to promote creation which will constitute an genuine bond between the European citizens.

Ethics

XX is concerned with preventing the notion of human rights to be diverted from its true object by extensive and improper use or interpretation. This problem arises particularly in two sensitive fields: that of the autonomy of decision as regards choices in life and that of bio-ethics.

XX considers for example, that it is unacceptable to use articles of the Charter to limit personal freedom regarding such delicate issues as the right to die in dignity or the possibility for women to terminate an unwanted pregnancy. Likewise to prevent research even on embryo or on the human genome no longer seems conceivable. If, for ethical reasons, measures of caution have to be taken, legislation will sooner or later be out of date because of the evolution of knowledge and then will be bypassed.

XX demands that the Union respects the different approaches to ethical matters.

Demand for security

The security of citizens depends on a large number of factors which do not amount only to fight petty or serious crime and to the anti-terrorism fight. Security concerns also proper living conditions, employment, social security (illness, unemployment ...).

XX insists so that:

- the Union develops policies that make the citizens feel secure with regard to these different fields.
- the fight against serious crime does not lead the Union to excesses restricting individual freedoms and not respecting the foundations of the human rights.

Fight against exclusion and poverty

Several European Councils have dealt with the struggle against poverty and social exclusion. The Council of Nice approved the objectives intended for the preparation of the plans presented in June 2001 by the member countries.

XX asks that all possible steps be taken to effectively implement the national plans. They should produce effect very quickly because the constant growth of poverty and of exclusion is unacceptable when Europe is one of the most prosperous regions of the world.

XX considers that the European Union can and must show the way to a more equitable way of life for all.

Scientific research

In the field of scientific research, the Union must pursue research policies in the framework of international co-operation so that a high level of knowledge is maintained.

The implementation of the results of this research has to reduce the gap with regard to developing countries.

Sustainable development

The concept of sustainable development has to embrace social, economical and environmental issues. Its implementation within and out of the Union, will allow the Union to play a crucial role in the evolution towards a more humane globalisation.

XX demands that the Union's objectives are pursued in the perspective of sustainable development, so that the needs of the present generation are fulfilled and at the same time the capacities of the future ones to answer theirs are not endangered. Such a development will tend to assure an acceptable balance between the economical demands, the improvement of the living conditions and the limits imposed by the physical environment and by the use of the natural resources.

Representation of civil society

The number of non-governmental organisations (NGO's) is rising. They intervene more and more directly on the political scene. Their opinion is asked for on numerous matters: human rights, ethics, environment, health issues, development co-operation, ...

These NGO's have a legal personality in one or several countries of the Union and, in certain cases, can take advantage of the European Convention, established by the Council of Europe in 1986 "on the recognition of the legal personality of international non-governmental organisations (INGO's)".

XX considers that, on a European level, clear rules have to be established concerning membership, democratic organising, legitimacy of representation, transparency of financing and accounting, of the European INGO's.

Public services

The public sector guarantees the equal treatment of all and constitutes an important factor for collective solidarity. Only a public sector capable of balancing the market forces by assuring the basic services to which every citizen must have access without distinction can prevent and reduce the social fracture.

XX wants :

- civil, social, cultural and educational responsibilities resulting from the Community policies to be assumed by public services and not by private bodies.
- public services and services of general interest to be guaranteed to all citizens without any exception.
- all necessary measures to be taken to reinforce the public sector in the following fields : education, culture, health, individual security, labour protection, environmental protection, assistance to disadvantaged persons, to the elderly and to the handicapped.

Multiparty working group for separation of religion and politic

The “All Party Working Group on Separation of Religion and Politics”, is an informal grouping of European parliamentarians, meeting regularly with members of civil society, with the aim of:

- Identifying issues of common interest in the field of religion/secularism and politics, primarily in the context of the European Union, but also at national and local level in Member States, when EU political values and principles are at stake;
- Identifying ways of working together and strengthening collaboration to raise awareness of these issues in the European Parliament and in other EU fora, as appropriate;
- Promoting knowledge, understanding and acceptance of freedom of thought, conscience and religion; of non-religion; of non discrimination on any ground; of the impartiality of EU institutions regarding organisations of faith and conviction and of religious pluralism, according to articles 10, 21 and 22 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union;
- Taking action, where appropriate, to counter any attempts to undermine democracy, human rights and in particular women’s rights and minority rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights, pluralism and the rule of law.

25/04/2005

Slovak concordat

EHF received an appeal from Prometheus society that was send to the working group for separation of religion and politic. This appeal was supported by different partners and also EHF members.

"We call for your help by forwarding this information to your deputies of parliament and to your national governments, and to propose to them to address Slovakia with a diplomatic Demarche stating clearly, that religious fundamentalism has no place in the EU. It would be desirable to warn Slovakia, that conditions of the CONCORDAT, which are at variance with democracy, principles of civil society and which violate the human rights of other citizens must be cancelled.

If Slovakia refused to revoke the whole Concordat, then it should completely revise its conditions. Its implementation at the present form could prevent ratifying the accession of Slovakia in the EU"

Letter on Slovakian Concordat with the Holy See

EHF was asking its members to send this letter, prepared by Prometheus society (Bratislava), to Prime minister of Slovakia.

Dear Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda,

I am writing to express my deep concern about the “Treaty between the Slovak Republic and the Holy See on the Right to Exercise Objection of Conscience.” The right of individuals to exercise objections of conscience and not to be forced to engage in actions they consider immoral or unethical is a right I support; however, there are occasions when that right may come into conflict with needs and rights of other citizens—including those granted by Slovak law—as well as with their personal ethical values. My concern is that this specific treaty creates serious legal problems and insufficiently addresses these possible conflicts.

I ask you not to sign and ratify this Treaty.

The Treaty will set a dangerous precedent in legal history. If ratified, the Treaty will become an “international human rights treaty,” taking precedence over both Slovak law and the judiciary. As a result, Catholic teaching may encroach on Slovak law and the judicial process, violating the impartiality of the courts.

The Treaty violates the Slovak principle of separation of the State and Church. The first article of the Slovak Constitution affirms the separation of the State and Church. The ratification of this Treaty would transform The Slovak Republic from a relatively secular state into a state where the dogma of one religion—Roman Catholicism—dominates all public spheres. If the proposed Treaty is ratified, the Holy See—a subject *sui generis* of international law that does not qualify for membership to the Council of Europe because its political structure and its legislation contradict the European Convention of Human Rights—would be able to impose its moral doctrine onto the citizens of the Slovak Republic, regardless of their religious beliefs or faith. If ratified, the Treaty would grant the Holy See the privilege to be a co-legislator in the Slovak Republic.

The Treaty violates Slovak commitments to Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action (ICPD). The Slovak Republic has committed to work on eliminating all forms of discrimination against women and to respect and promote women’s sexual and reproductive rights. The moral doctrine of the Catholic church, however, opposes contraception and abortion, even to save the life of a woman. This severely curtails women’s basic human rights. It should be noted in the context of the Treaty that for ICPD, several attempts were made by the Holy See to introduce language regarding the right to conscientious objection. These efforts were rejected by the full conference as overreaching and a burden to access to reproductive health services, as they went beyond guaranteeing the right to objection to individuals by seeking to give that right to institutions as well.

This Treaty is unnecessary. Article 10 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which will soon be ratified through the European Constitution, guarantees the freedom of conscience and of conscientious objection. This will be legally binding on The Slovak Republic. Other less limiting methods of granting the right to conscientious objection are available through legislation, a more democratic root than an international treaty.

In the name of the universal right to the freedom of religion, of thought and of conscience, for the honour of the Slovak Republic and for the well being of the Slovak people, I urge you to reject this Treaty.

Sincerely,

24/02/2005

Legal appraisal on concordats

The Parliamentary Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) requested a legal appraisal by the European Commission's Network of Independent Experts on Fundamental Rights on the following three questions:

- Do concordats take precedence over national law, *in casu* national constitutions ?
- Do concordats take precedence over EU law ?
- Are there potential areas of conflict between concordats and EU law, notably the EU Fundamental Rights ?
- Can concordats be revoked unilaterally ?

Summary of opinion 4-2005 from the EU network of independent experts on fundamental rights on the right of conscientious objection and the conclusion by EU member states of concordats with the holy see (14 December 2005)

By David Pollock (BHA Trustee)

(I) The Opinion was produced at the request of the EU Commission, prompted by the European Parliament. [This process originated with the All Party Group on Separation of Religion and Politics, which was alerted and briefed by the European Humanist Federation.]

(II) The request arose from a draft Treaty between the Vatican and the Slovak Republic which seeks to implement a provision of the 'Basic Concordat' of 2000 under which Slovakia recognises the right 'of all' to conscientious objection according to Catholic doctrines. If ratified it will be binding on both parties under international law, terminable only by joint agreement - a status that follows from the Holy See being internationally recognised as an independent state.

Although the draft Treaty states that it is to be implemented 'in conformity with' the Slovak legal system, it binds the state to 'preserve the essence and meaning' of the right to conscientious objection, and courts will be bound by the contents of the Treaty. Similarly, although the Treaty will not take precedence over the Slovak constitution, the article of the constitution on freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief may well be interpreted in the light of the Treaty. The Opinion remarks that in some countries (for example, Italy), concordats are recognised in the constitution, while in others they may supervene over national law but are subordinate to the constitution, needing to be reconciled with it before ratification (as in Spain).

(III.1) The Opinion then reviews many of the concordats in place between the Vatican and EU member states. Only three of these contain provisions about conscientious objection, but in two cases the right is restricted to the clergy and persons in similar roles and in all three the objection is restricted to military service (effectively irrelevant in those states that have abolished conscription). The Slovak proposals therefore break new ground.

(III.2) However, all EU states recognise freedom of religion, and therefore to some extent the right of conscientious objection, and many states have national legislation on the subject. The Opinion

reviews such laws in a number of countries: for example, the constitutions of Germany and Portugal give wide recognition to the right of conscientious objection, while in most countries there are laws or less formally recognised rights of conscientious objection in specific sectors, such as teaching or performing same-sex marriages (see annex).

The Opinion concentrates attention on areas of potential conflict for health service staff such as euthanasia, contraception, artificial fertilisation and - especially - abortion. It reports (for example) that there is widespread recognition of a right for doctors and (usually) other health professionals to refuse to take part in abortions (as in Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, France, Hungary, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom) but that the right is sometimes limited (in Denmark medical staff have to apply for exemption, in Italy the right does not extend to caring for the patient before and after the abortion, in Italy and the UK it does not apply when there is a risk to life, in Belgium and France the doctor must inform the patient immediately that s/he will not provide an abortion) and often counterbalanced by an obligation on the health administrations to provide abortions (as in France, Italy and Spain).

(III.3) Looking at the legal principles, the Opinion says that failure to recognise conscientious objection would amount to indirect discrimination under Articles 14 and 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). (The UN Human Rights Committee (HRC), dealing specifically with military service, has made a similar finding under Article 18 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).) But pre-existing international obligations on a state under (for example) the ECHR cannot be limited by granting unlimited rights of conscientious objection, even if this is provided for in a new international treaty, such as a concordat.

(III.3.2a) The Opinion then explores this area of conflict with specific reference to abortion services. In a previous Opinion, the Network of Independent Experts expressed the view that prohibition or unavailability of abortions would tend to increase the number of clandestine abortions procured. The HRC had examined in 2004 the situation in Poland, where abortions were legal only in limited circumstances and were further restricted by widespread invocation by doctors of their right of conscientious objection. Women wanting abortions were denied their rights, had no effective legal recourse by way of appeal against a doctor's refusal to operate and too frequently put their health at risk by seeking unsafe, illegal abortions. One such case was the subject of a case pending before the European Court of Human Rights, being based on the argument that a state that fails to make abortion available in circumstances where it is legal is in violation of Articles 3, 8, 13 and 14 of the ECHR.

The Opinion states that although no general right to abortion has yet been legally recognised under the ECHR, there is such a right if the pregnancy offers a serious threat to a woman's health (and all EU states permit abortion in such circumstances). It suggests that there is an emerging consensus that the threat to health from illegal abortions in circumstances where legal availability is too severely restricted may be subject to an analogous argument by reference (in particular) to the right to life under Article 6 of the ICCPR. Similarly, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has recommended liberalisation of abortion laws by states that are party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Further, Article 7 of the ICCPR (infliction of inhuman and degrading treatment) may be engaged in such circumstances - an argument successfully invoked in a recent case against Peru under the Covenant.

The Opinion suggests that international human rights instruments oblige states both to provide an effective way of challenging a refusal to provide an abortion, and to require doctors and others exercising their right of conscientious objection to refer their patients to doctors without such objections - and indeed to oblige states to ensure that doctors without such objections are available, even in remote areas.

(III.3.2b) Similarly, the Opinion suggests that such arguments can be used to argue that rights to conscientious objection must not be allowed to prevent people from exercising their right to obtain contraceptive supplies - or indeed rights implied by decriminalisation of (for example) euthanasia or assisted suicide or same-sex marriage. The Opinion points to interpretations by UN committees of broad treaty requirements in respect of women's health as requiring family planning services to be available.

(III.3.2c) It also points out that the right to conscientious objection must not be granted in a discriminatory fashion only to followers of one or some religions.

(III.4) The Opinion briefly reviews the recognition of conscientious objection in EU law - particularly in the employment directive which gives limited exemptions to organisations with an ethos based on a religion or belief.

(III.5) It then examines the draft Slovak Treaty in the light of the above principles, noting that some of the most objectionable aspects of the Treaty as originally drafted have been removed or amended as a result of earlier protests.

However, there remain many questionable and objectionable features. The draft Treaty proposes a joint Slovak and Vatican commission with an oversight role to monitor 'individual activities' giving rise to conscientious objection and to comment on proposed legislation and make proposals for legislation and for changes to the concordat. The Opinion says that this Commission would risk contravening Article 6 of the ECHR (right to fair trial) if the Commission commented on pending judicial proceedings.

The Opinion says that the Treaty would risk limiting the right of access to medical services such as (to quote the draft Treaty) 'abortion, artificial or assisted fertilisation, experiments with and handling of human organs, human embryos and human sex cells, euthanasia, cloning, sterilisation or contraception', especially given that it would go beyond individual conscientious objection and debar the Slovak government from directly or indirectly imposing any duty to provide such services on any hospital or facility with a Catholic foundation. The Opinion notes the weakness of the saving clause in the draft Treaty that conscientious objection must not endanger life or health, that there is no obligation to refer patients to practitioners without conscientious objections nor any obligation on the state to provide access to lawful services, counter to international undertakings by the Slovak republic.

The Treaty would moreover put the Catholic church in a privileged position, despite the country's secular constitution, both by its definition of conscientious objection in terms of Catholic doctrine and by its status in international law by contrast with the local agreements envisaged by the government with certain other churches registered with the state. The Opinion notes that there are questions about the equity of the registration procedure and that many persons are not members of any registered church but should still have the right of conscientious objection.

Concluding, the Opinion states that the proposed Treaty would violate the Slovak republic's obligations under the ICCPR, the ICESCR and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Insofar as these breaches affect the rights of women to counselling in the field of reproductive health and access to medical services, they would also breach the state's duties under the EU Directive 2004 /113/EC on equal treatment of men and women in the access to and supply of goods and services.

European Commission

Directive establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and education.

In 2000, National secular Society (NSS) attracted EHF attention on this draft directive and its article 4 allowing discrimination with respect to education. EHF send its remark to the Commission.

"Member States may provide that, in the case of public or private organisations which pursue directly and essentially the aim of ideological guidance in the field of religion or belief with respect to education, information and the expression of opinions, and for the particular occupational activities within those organisations which are directly and essentially related to that aim, a difference of treatment based on a relevant characteristic related to religion or belief shall not constitute discrimination where, by reason of the nature of these activities, the characteristic constitutes a genuine occupational qualification."

The existing wording is so unclear it is likely to permit exemptions on a scale that will seriously undermine the noble intention of the Directive. The exemption should be limited to posts where the promotion of a religious or ideological viewpoint is the prime function. Exemption should of course be permitted for priests, rabbis and those in religious orders.

The Society does not, however, accept that Religious Education teachers should be exempted from the scope of the Directive because their purpose (in the UK) is to inform pupils about one religion in particular and other religions/philosophies in general.

We urge that: a) Article 4 is clarified to ensure that the Genuine Occupational Qualification exemptions are severely limited and b) the draft Directive proposals on (statutory) sexual orientation is implemented in full. To do so would be in the spirit of the Human Rights Act and the prospective EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

Memorandum to the Presidency of the European Union

This memorandum was send to the newly elected president of the EU. It reproduced some of the topics presented at the occasion of the election of European Parliamentarians in June 2004.

The European Humanist Federation was created in July 1991 and has the status of an international association under Belgian law.

The EHF-FHE federates numerous humanist organisations from most European countries, including Central European countries.

Some of them are quite old, others were created fairly recently. They all develop actions in the many fields of community life, from development co-operation to the organisation of civil ceremonies to the representation of "non-believers" and the promotion of the "laïcité" of society.

The number of affiliated members of the organisations member of the EHF-FHE in the different European countries exceeds several million persons.

The main objective of the EHF-FHE is to represent its members and to promote the principles of humanism and of a secular society to the European institutions. The EHF-FHE develops exchanges between its members and the circulation of information and of experience in order to contribute to the development of the humanist values in Europe.

The European Humanist Federation and its member organisations have paid particular attention to several aspects of the evolution of the European Union.

Let us mention the issues related to citizenship and to the non-discrimination between persons in different periods of life.

The EHF-FHE has drawn up positions from a humanist point of view on matters such as the human rights, ethics, development co-operation, liberties, democratic principles, citizenship or separation between Church and State.

The EHF-FHE is the humanist representative at the Forward Studies Unit of the European Commission. It chairs the co-ordinating committee of the Initiative “A Soul for Europe – Ethics and spirituality”

The EHF-FHE takes part in the Expert committee of the European Commission on issues related to bio-ethics (GAEIB).

The EHF-FHE has intervened several times at public hearings, e.g. for the preparation of the Amsterdam Intergovernmental Conference (1997 IGC) or the elaboration of a Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union in 2000.

The EHF-FHE follows carefully issues dealt with at the Council of Europe, especially concerning human rights and bio-ethics. It has taken a stand particularly on the International Convention on Bio-medicine as well as on several Resolutions.

In a general way, these different actions are guided by the concern of developing in the European Union, participative democracy, tolerance towards the various trends of thinking as well as equality of rights for citizens whatever their religious or philosophical convictions.

Views on the Europe Union

The member organisations of the EHF-FHE militate for going beyond nationalism, for respecting human rights, for a humanist moral approach based on responsibility and civil and social solidarity, and for philosophical pluralism.

Their action is founded on a rational ethical standpoint based essentially on free thinking and on freedom of conscience.

The EHF-FHE has undertaken to develop the interest its member organisations have for the European Union. It is with this aim that a survey is conducted on their wishes, expectations and concerns within the present context.

The survey is not finished yet, but already certain matters have arisen which have been included in this document.

Our Federation is willing to take part in the project of a European Union as long as it is an open and tolerant Union.

Political aspects

The EHF-FHE reiterates its wish, already expressed at the hearings in the frame of the 1997 IGC, to see the European Union adhere to the European Convention on Human Rights. This should go with the recognition of the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights and of the right for individuals to petition. This system would allow the control by a judge outside the Community juridical order, of the compatibility of the Community law with the European Convention on Human Rights.

Many people consider that the European Union is at present excessively bound to the market economy, to banking and monetary powers and insufficiently imbued with social and democratic concerns.

Such disillusionment, sometimes expressed in a confused way, should be clearly dealt with in particular in the future declaration of Laeken.

European Constitution

If the project of a European Constitution takes shape, it must go beyond the old divisions and avoid 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".

Contrary to the States of the "Ancien Régimes", 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.

If tomorrow's Europe is to be of harmony and solidarity, it will need a civic and social requirement, so that its ethnic, religious, cultural and political elements can harmonise, and this requirement can only be "Laïcité". Humanist ethics and its social and civic idealism remain for Europe a path to the future.

Our organisations renew to the national and European politicians their proposal of including EXPLICIT GUARANTEES of "LAÏCITÉ" in the treaties and measures governing the European Union.

Such guarantees concern more particularly the issues developed in the following paragraphs.

Coherent policy of immigration and of asylum.

Let us be reminded that a fundamental distinction between asylum policy and immigration policy has to be made.

Deeply concerned by the human rights, the EHF-FHE urges the European Union to take all measures with the States of the Union in order to take all possible steps to ensure, in a concerted way, at all stages of the reception of refugees and asylum seekers, the respect of human dignity.

The EHF-FHE calls the politicians to review the current immigration policy so that a coherent European policy is implemented.

In the name of the principle of equality, the EHF-FHE demands that asylum seekers have at their disposal the means required for the instructions of their application, under conditions safeguarding the respect of persons and of procedure taking into account real-life situations.

The policy of border control must absolutely be accompanied by the implementation of human and material means suited to the requirements of the respect of the humanist values defended by the States.

Such a policy must be part of a revising of the North-South relations and of a development policy.

Joining of new member States

Several member organisations of the EHF-FHE, in particular in Poland and in Slovakia, are quite worried by the serious blows struck at democracy in their country, mainly due to the intervention of the Catholic Church at all levels of public institutions.

The attention of European Institutions and of member States has to be drawn to these problems which concern the respect of human rights, liberties and discrimination mainly against women and non-Catholics (atheists, Jews, ...).

Measures have to be taken here and now so that the joining of certain States to the Union does not introduce new conflicts with a religious connotation when these have disappeared or been largely subdued in the countries of the Union.

Separation Churches – Union

The Europe that is being built is a Europe of cultural, ethnic, religious diversity. It must be an area of tolerance and, better still, of respect and of mutual understanding. The EHF-FHE stresses the role that the public authorities have to play in this matter.

We consider that only pre-eminence of what is civil on what is religious, of general public interest on aspiration of particular ideological groups, can avoid socio-cultural diversity being expressed by a juxtaposition of ghettos indifferent, if not conflicting, or worse hostile to each other.

If the European Union wants to be an area of freedom, of security and of justice, it is by affirming, in accordance with the democratic legitimacy, the principle founded on the separation of the public authority from any particular power or partisan influence of whatever nature, that it will most certainly succeed.

The Community institutions will safeguard the absolute independence of official bodies, of public services and of European legal activities as regards Churches, clergies, religious influences.

Civic, social, cultural and educational responsibilities ensuing from Community policies are to be assumed by the public services of the Community and will not be passed on to private organisations.

As regards religion, the exercise of legitimate rights (individual and collective) will be guaranteed by the Community law in the frame of the private sphere to which they pertain, without ever interfering with the public and political field.

Equality of rights

A democratic State is characterised by the recognition for each individual of a sphere of autonomy that the State must respect and safeguard, by all means, especially by providing an equality of treatment for any individual and for any particular group.

The adhesion or not to a religion pertains to the private sphere of each citizen. Every citizen is free to believe or not to believe in god; each religion is free to get organised as it wishes.

The non-discrimination of persons is essential as regards religious or philosophical convictions - whatever its nature - in application of the Treaty of the Union (Amsterdam 1997) as well as of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, in its article 21.

However it has to be noted that if freedom of thought, of conscience and of religion is generally guaranteed by the member States, we are very far from equality of treatment with respect to the material means put at the disposal of religious organisations by the States.

Nowadays, many people have adopted a non-religious life-stance whereas most European States still behave as if they consider that all the citizens still belong to a religion.

Therefore serious discriminations are being maintained within the European Union. In our opinion, it is not acceptable that the application of the principle of subsidiarity allows any longer the non-respect of the right of each citizen to non-discrimination as regards material means.

Importance of cultural creation

The European Union is in search of its identity. There persists a trend to turn to what one calls the “communities of conviction” that are in particular religions and churches.

However the development of a society as well as the understanding and respectful approach of its various constituents goes mainly through a cultural project.

Such a project is necessary first of all to allow one another to get to know their respective sensibility and thus to understand each other better, even to appreciate each other, but above all it mainly constitutes an important factor of social cohesion.

The original culture should be made known and not imported products that the “profitability of the market” favours. The culture market alone does not meet the objectives pursued, on the contrary it would tend to destabilise people culturally and sometimes socially too.

All the societies have promoted, in one way or another, cultural creation. It is through it that the heritage of our predecessors could be passed down to us.

It is time that the European Union gets provided with a real ambitious cultural project, in a spirit of dialogue between the components of society.

Such a project must aim primarily at promoting creation which will constitute a genuine bond between Europeans.

Ethics

Another of our concerns is to prevent the notion of “human rights” from being diverted from its true object by extensive and improper use or interpretation.

This problem is posed particularly in two sensitive fields : the one dealing with the autonomy of decision in matters of choices in life and the other concerning bio-ethics.

For example, it is unacceptable to use articles of the Charter to restrict the individual freedom regarding such delicate issues as the right to a dignified death or the possibility for women to terminate an unwanted pregnancy. Just as we consider that the use of a Charter of Fundamental Rights to prevent research on embryo or on the human genome is no longer conceivable in a Europe concerned with the respect of approaches in matters of ethics.

In a general way, the EHF-FHE considers as inappropriate to include in a Charter of Fundamental Rights limits to scientific research. If, for ethical reasons, measures of caution have to be taken, they will sooner or later be out of date with the evolution of knowledge and then bypassed.

Fight against exclusion and poverty

Several European Councils have dealt with the fight against poverty and social exclusion. The council of Nice approved the objectives aimed at the preparation of plans by member countries. They are to be presented in June 2001.

The EHF-FHE asks the Belgian presidency to take all possible steps to effectively implement the national plans. These should produce effects very quickly for it is not acceptable to have to observe a continuing growth of poverty and exclusion when Europe is one of the most prosperous regions of the world.

The European union can and must show the way to a more equitable way of life.

Europe vector of peace

Europe has a long tradition of human rights and the proclamation of a charter of fundamental Rights represents a step forward and is further evidence of it.

The implementation of a Europe able to make decisions in a democratic way and under a real parliamentary control is the key requisite for its international role for peace. Not to make Europe a bastion isolated from the rest of the world, but to render prevailing the values of democracy, tolerance and solidarity without which peace is not possible.

Only a European Union capable of taking political decisions while speaking with one voice will be able to intervene to have human rights respected and to make peace reign.

Such action concerns not only the European area, but also the countries of the Mediterranean region with which the European Union has had close relations for a long time.

Representation of civil society

Non-governmental organisations (NGO's) intervene more and more directly or have their opinion asked for in numerous matters, human rights, ethical issues, environment, health, development co-operation, etc ...

The number of these NGO's keeps increasing. They have a legal personality in one or several countries of the Union and, in certain cases, can take advantage of the European Convention, established by the council of Europe in 1986, "on the recognition of the legal personality of international non-governmental organisations (INGO's)".

In the present context, the EHF-FHE considers that clear rules have to be established, on the European level, concerning the membership, the democratic organising, the legitimacy of representation, the openness of the financing and accounting of European INGO's.

The European Social and Economic Committee organised, in October 1999, a symposium on "Civil society organised on a European level", the proceedings of which give several interesting requirements, yet juridical imprecise.

Brussels, May 2001

Audience of EHF Board by President Barroso (November 9, 2005)

A press release

The President of the European Commission, J. M. Barroso, has received in the building of the presidency in Brussels, a delegation of the European Humanist Federation (EHF) composed of women and men of several European nationalities.

The delegation informed the President of the objectives of the EHF aiming at developing a society based on tolerance, democracy and solidarity, on freedom of conscience and on equality between men and women.

In a society marked by the search for profit and by wild competition which disconcerts many people, EHF and its member organisations strongly wish to contribute to build a progressive and tolerant society, without any discrimination nor privileges.

EHF invited the president of the European Commission to ensure that the impartiality of the Institutions of the Union is respected, particularly in ethics committees or in any other groups, as well as regarding experts and other agents.

The delegation has insisted that no discrimination be accepted, in particular against non believers and that they enjoy, in all the countries of the European Union, a consideration equal to the one granted to religious convictions.

The President underlined the importance of developing the dialogue to bring together the European Union and its citizens. He pointed out that the values of the Union are also those of humanism.

Address of EHF President to President Barroso

Mr. President,

Thank you very much for inviting us.

We feel it is important that you should know about us. Polls show that from one third to one half of the population of Europe in reality has no religious life stance or world view, although many of them formally belong to a religion, but in many countries with a low regular attendance at church offices.

The main objective of the EHF-FHE is twofold: on the one hand to promote the principles of a democratic and secular society with impartial Institutions, the dignity of human beings and freedom of conscience, and on the other hand to defend the interests of the Humanists.

The number of humanists active in our member association exceeds several millions to which can be added at least the same number of occasional sympathisers.

The European Humanist Federation (EHF) has as members national humanist and free-thought organisations all over Europe. As far as we can see, we are the only organisation on a European level that speaks for the people who do not feel at home in churches, mosques and similar buildings. And we do speak for their interests, whether they are members or not.

Our members develop actions in the many fields of community life, a important part of our work is to provide ceremonies for these people. We arrange naming ceremonies for small new citizens of Europe, we do weddings and funerals. Although the churches are not very happy about it, we also have humanist confirmations in the countries where confirmation is a tradition. In my own country Norway about eleven thousand youngsters will take the humanist confirmation courses in 2006 and participate in the celebration at the end of the course. This is not bad for a country of 4,5 million people altogether.

Humanists believe in no afterlife. This makes our life on Earth all the more important for us, and we strive to improve human conditions to the best of our abilities. We think that all life stances, religious and non-religious, should have an equal status in every nation. This is certainly not the case all over Europe. In many countries the dominant religion has privileges compared to other religions – and to humanists. This is not comparable with the principles of democracy.

The development of the European Union with its 25 member States present a unique opportunity to promote "a better living together" through humanism. In this way, EHF-FHE develops exchanges between its members and the circulation of information and of experience in order to contribute to the development of the humanist values in Europe.

What the European Union does has a very large impact on Europe. We offer what assistance we can, especially on what concerns the secular population of our continent. We hope that the European Union will accept us as a useful partner in the future.

Steinar Nilsen
President

Organisation of Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)

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Drugs trade : let us regulate the sales of drugs for the freedom and the safety of all (whether they are users or not)

One century of prohibition has not succeeded in eliminating the circulation, trafficking, sales and consumption of drugs. On the contrary drugs are more and more present and easily available. Prohibition has even increased the social, sanitary and safety problems more than it has solved them. Confusion and legal insecurity prevail: it is difficult to distinguish what is forbidden from what is allowed.

The European Humanist Federation (EHF) recognises the failure and the excesses of the repressive fight against the use of drugs. EHF has also noticed that current legislation is incompatible with the humanist values, because of their discriminatory nature.

The member States in the European Union must promote the independence and emancipation of the citizens and protect them

Humanist values

EHF promotes values such as freedom and democracy, individual responsibility and autonomy. It stresses above all the development of responsible policies fully integrating the differentiation between the private and the public fields. As far as drugs are concerned, the Humanists defend the right for citizens to choose freely and in complete safety, the product or the products that s/he wishes to consume, while respecting the freedom of others.

The international context

We can wish that our values are directly employed in the elaboration of a new legislative and instructive norm.

Nevertheless we have to take into account political and juridical objections. "International conventions" are often seen as an obstacle for every significant change of national and international politics.

Four conventions are called upon:

- Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (30 March 1961)
- Convention on Psychotropic Substances (21 February 1971)
- United Nations Convention against the Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (20 December 1988)
- Convention Implementing The Schengen Agreement of 14 June 1985 on the gradual abolition of checks at their common borders (19 June 1990)

These international treaties, having as aim the prevention of people's health, show two aspects:

1°) they establish a system of controlled international and national legislation concerning growth, production or possession of drugs, necessary for pharmaceutical aims, animal and human medicine and for scientific science.

2°) these international conventions oblige the signing states to criminalise everyone who possess, transport, sell, buy, import drugs and psychotropic substances, without respecting the system of established rules.

The system of regulation of the allowed trade in drugs goes in a satisfying way. The production of 'natural' stupefying substances (coca-leaves, cannabis or opium-poppy) is controlled by almost every country in the world. The trade itself is submitted to strict rules concerning permission and exchange of data between trading states or companies who have the permission to trade.

An analogue system works for psychotropic substances ('chemical drugs': i.e. with industrial and synthetic origin). The complete legislation and lawful traffic takes place under the eye of The International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). The states are obliged to inform the INCB (nearly legislative organ) on statistics and possible prospects. These data are analysed and discussed in a report, published by the INCB every year. The INCB and UNODC are also charged with the duty to help states in their politics on drugs.

Jurists are divided on the interpretation of these conventions. A part of them gives preference to a narrow interpretation and supposes that a state can't regulate drugs for other purposes than for medical or scientific use. Others state that the public health is the ultimate aim of these conventions and point to the exceptions based on other constitutional principles that allow drugs. These people maintain that the recreational use of drugs can be regulated by the state.

In our opinion it is possible to take a progressive stand on these different treaties. We do not violate our international obligations when we want to regulate the use of all drugs for other than medical and scientific reasons, as the application of our philosophical principles demands.

Therefore we have to take the opportunity that is given by this not contradicted interpretation of the conventions and order a scientific research concerning drugs.

We ask ourselves if this scientific research can't find a broader experimental field, especially in social sciences and epidemiology. It is evident that it has to be proven.

So we have to reflect on the scientific nature of the research on human, socio-political or epidemiological level. Afterwards we can elaborate the project of regulation and legislation within the criteria of the scientific character of the field of research.

A public health experiment

EHF puts forward an innovative proposal for a new legislation. Its originality lies in an experimentation of a new public health approach aimed at controlling the trade of currently illicit drugs.

The expectation is that this approach will have a positive effect on the physical and psychological health, on the well-being and on the social conditions of drug users as well as on the whole population.

This public health experiment comes down to opening registered sales locations, authorised by the state, where the substances concerned by the regulation would be sold. The sales will be subjected to strict conditions and to a control system similar to the system in force for pharmacies, the products being manufactured by commercial companies under state licence.

Is this the solution ?

Drugs control is probably not a panacea in the face of excessive consumption. Regulation will not avoid addiction for those who are used to over consumption, but it will help avoid increasing their social, financial or legal difficulties.

Regulation will allow a control of the quality and of the distribution and sales of such products and will avoid major sanitary complications.

The proposal could be an intermediate step before the adoption of a new legislation, an alternative more respectful of the autonomy of citizens.

Requests

With regard to the anti-drug strategy for the period 2005-2012, approved by the European Council on September 17, 2004, and the resolution of the European Parliament of December 14, 2004, and thus the great importance the European Union gives to the problem of drugs, EHF is asking the OSCE for similar effort. At this moment the OSCE concentrates itself especially on the trade of drugs on an international level (e.g. Regional Conference on Mechanisms for Suppression and Prevention of International Illicit Trading in Precursor and Synthetic Drugs, 21-22 June 2005, Belgrade). More precisely EHF proposes:

- the re-negotiation of the conventions in the lap of the United Nations in order to clarify the international will and to engage a world-wide debate on the topic;
- to encourage the research on non-repressive methods against the use of drugs;
- an information strategy explaining drugs in a way that is as unbiased as possible and of which are removed all moralising and religious messages and preconceived ideas, that is to say “detoxicated” information;
- at the same time the implementation of a strategy to control the trading of drugs, the prices, the quality of the products from their production to their consumption.

Position on different matters

Euthanasia at Council of Europe

A press release December 1, 2000

Mrs E. Gatterer (Austria, EPP/CD), Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly Rapporteur on euthanasia, has declared in a press release that the law on euthanasia adopted by the Dutch Parliament is contrary to the European Human Rights Convention.

Article 2 of this international convention states that “no one shall be deprived of his life intentionally”. Mrs Gatterer infers that “a terminally ill or dying person’s wish to die can never constitute a legal justification to death” and has urged the Dutch Senate not to adopt the law on euthanasia. Such misinterpretation is particularly offensive and excessive as, for the sake of the “right to life”, she takes no account of the will of the person, terminally ill or dying.

The right to life is transformed into an obligation to live, even in a situation of great suffering.

The European Humanist Federation (EHF) is indignant that Mrs Gatterer goes beyond her competence by setting up as a dogmatic moral authority and by deciding for other persons, which affects their dignity.

EHF and European humanists defend the right to “a death in dignity”.

They have to be taught no lesson on Human Rights by a representative of a European party to which belong the friends of Jorg Haider.

EHF urges the European democrats and members of Parliament to put an end to such attempts at exerting undue influence.

Death sentence: case of Dr. Shaikh

A press release, March 4, 2002

The Board of the European Humanist Federation, meeting in Brussels, on 3 March 2002 :

- has noted that on numerous occasions, severe corporal punishment, amputation and flogging, are practised by several States,

- is indignant that sentence to death is pronounced for religious reasons, in particular in Pakistan against Doctor Yunous Shaikh, accused of blasphemy, and in the Federal Republic of Nigeria, against Ms Safyia Yakubu Hussaini, accused of adultery even though she is not married,

- urges the Institutions of the European Union to take all possible steps so that those States put an end to such practices.

The European Humanist Federation defends the right to freedom of religion and of conviction, but cannot accept that, by misusing religious freedom, such excesses are committed.

To reject the candidature of R. Buttiglione as Commissioner of Freedom, security and Justice

A press release (28/10/04)

As many other European NGOs, the European Humanist Federation (EHF) supports the judicious decision of European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso to postpone the vote by the European Parliament on his Commission.

As Europeans, we deserve commissioners that are fair, just and capable of administering the law in a manner that advances the public good. We strongly object to the appointment of Dr. Rocco Buttiglione as Commissioner of Freedom, Security and Justice. Dr. Buttiglione is not qualified to defend and promote human rights for all persons because of his discriminatory and offensive positions on women, gays and lesbians.

EHF acknowledges and thanks Members of the European Parliament who stood firm in their defence of human rights in the EU and their opposition to the appointment of Dr. Buttiglione.

EHF expects Mr. Barroso to present a new slate of commissioners who will ensure that the human rights of all persons are respected and upheld.

The European Commission invites the Church of Scientology and expels the humanists

A press release

The European Commission, through the Group of Political Advisers of President Prodi (GOPA), invited on 16 November 2004, in its premises, the representatives of organisations of faith and convictions, in order to inform them of the conclusions of the latest meeting of the European Council of Ministers held on 4 and 5 November.

The European Humanist Federation representing the majority of European humanist and secular organisations deeply regrets that the GOPA violates the principle of impartiality by neglecting to invite to this meeting the humanists of the European Humanist Federation, while inviting non only

representatives of religions as well as the Church of Scientology, but also numerous civil organisations with a religious character.

The European Humanist Federation strongly disapproves of the discrimination against the humanists shown by the GOPA, which has nothing to do whatsoever with an "open and transparent" dialogue.

Brussels, 17 November 2004

EHF and the EU Constitutional Treaty

This letter was send to EHF members on December 8, 2004

All 25 member States in the EU have to take a position with respect to the Constitutional Treaty signed last October 2004 by the heads of government.

The EHF Board is of the opinion that the most important and interesting attitude as a Humanist association is to promote the debate amongst our member organisations and their individual members.

According to this and considering that EHF is not a political party, nor a Church giving instruction to its faithful, the role of EHF is to campaign neither in favour, nor against ratification.

Humanism and "laicity" require freedom of thinking for individuals. In this respect, it is particularly important that everybody examines the general perspectives offered by the new Treaty, without focusing too much only on one or two specific items.

A Constitutional Treaty is an important step as regards citizenship and involves many subjects. It is quite clear that everybody cannot be satisfied on all these many topics. As an example, humanists and "laiques" but also many religious groups disagree with article 52 (ex 51) giving the possibility to some churches to intervene in the preparation of political decisions, but Christian Churches are disappointed at not having obtained in the preamble of the Treaty any reference to a "Christian heritage".

But humanism and "laicity" are not strictly limited to religious interventions in public life but more generally have also deep concerns for freedom of conscience (which involves freedom of religion) and fight for democracy and citizenship and also for the separation between Churches and State.

During the Convention "For the future of Europe" and throughout the preparation of the Treaty, EHF and its members, together with many other associations of civil society, were very active in fighting against the privileges of the Churches and in favour of democracy and citizenship, through press conferences, public hearings, colloquia in different countries and petitions to national governments.

EHF also argued strongly in favour of some key objectives ie., science and society, public services, participative democracy, neutrality of Euro Institutions, sustainable development, rethinking the principle of subsidiarity, values and objectives of the European Union (solidarity, democracy, non discrimination, human rights...).

Now it is too late to ask for any immediate modification of the Treaty.

EHF Board considers time is now for debates and finally for a personal decision as independent and responsible citizens.

Freedom of expression and caricatures

A press release

"Some men believe in one god. Others believe in several. Some consider themselves agnostic and offer no opinion. Others, finally, are atheists. All must live together. And this life in common, since the first Declaration of Human Rights, must ensure freedom of conscience and equal rights for all." (Henri Pena Ruiz)

European humanist federation (EHF) considers that only a pluralistic state guarantees freedom of conscience and opinion. This freedom includes the freedom to believe or not and to adhere or not to one religion or another, without any religion or belief being privileged or subject to constraints constituting exceptions to ordinary law. This pluralism is indispensable to "living together".

Without freedom of expression there can be no pluralism. And "*freedom of expression is applicable not only to 'information' or 'ideas' that are favourably received or regarded as inoffensive, but also to those that offend, shock or disturb*"². The rule against representing the founder of Islam is a religious rule that concerns only Muslims, to the extent that they feel concerned. In no case can a strictly religious prohibition justify limiting freedom of expression. Hence, the fact that the controversial caricatures offend or disturb the sensitivity of a community (religious or not) cannot, in any measure, justify forbidding their publication.

Yet freedom of expression is not without limits: a statement, a book, a drawing can be an incitement to hatred, violence, or discrimination against a person, a group, a community, or members of a group or community, on the basis of race, colour, ascendance, or national or ethnic origin. If so it is reprehensible and can be forbidden by law.

In the case of the *Jyllands-Posten* caricatures, a reproach that can be made is that they equate Islam with criminal intolerance and terrorism. This identification is untrue, as most Muslims consider their religion as a message of peace and concord.

Yet there does exist an intolerant and terrorist Islamism, and EHF deplores the fact that the violent, hateful reactions we have been witnessing contribute, more surely than any caricatures, to sustaining the link in people's minds between Islam and intolerance and to reinforcing the most radical stances.

Religions have contributed to universal thought, culture, and philosophy. Religions have carried and continue to carry meaning for many people. Yet too often they have also carried, or continue to carry messages that are often meaningless, untrue and hate-provoking.

Too often, in the past, religions have been the root of conflict, and it can even be said that religious intolerance has been practically constant in Europe. All violations of freedom of expression must be denounced with the same firmness, whatever their origin.

No religion is above criticism. None can claim immunity or a special status. EHF is opposed to any attempt to limit, through legislation or legal action, the right to challenge and criticise, within the limits of the law, all religions, their doctrines, and the actions of those who call themselves religious. On the other hand, EHF vigorously rejects equating Islam with terrorism. It also opposes any general condemnation of Danes, French, Norwegians or Europeans by Muslims or Islam as well as all acts of violence committed in a spirit of revenge and in the name of an insulted prophet.

Furthermore EHF supports all those within the Muslim community who are willing to confront, in depth, the delicate issue of the violence inherent in some Koranic precepts. For any non-specialist, Muslim or not, reading them outside their context of 15 centuries ago, such texts sound like calls to hate Jews, Christians, and non-believers, to humiliate women, and to carry on a holy war. Yet clearly, most Muslims live Islam as a religion of peace. May their voices ring out loud and clear

² Case-law of the European Court of Human Rights

and may this vision prevail. And may Muslim authorities unequivocally condemn turning their prophet or god into a political or murderous instrument. This appeal is addressed to the leaders of the other religions as well.

EHF will continue its appeals for mutual understanding beyond all traditions and beliefs. It invites people to create bridges among themselves, in order to highlight what links us together, to support all those who are striving for progress, and to bring together those who can draw from our collective memory everything that favours an opening to dialogue and modernity.

EHF Board of Directors, Paris 11 February 2006

Information

EHF is using preferentially informatic means for communication, although some cheap brochures are occasionally published. Two egroup of information and exchanges are managed by EHF, one of these being reserved to EHF members and the other one open to everybody interested to humanism. EHF web site (www.humanism.be) now contains many document, most of these in French and in English, and some of the talks delivered at the occasion of European conferences. Two videos and DVD have been produced. "2500 years of free thinking" was translated in six languages, with a support of the European Commission, and recently "drugs, open questions", a report and interviews on the drug situation, financed by Centre d'action laïque.

International Colloquia

Several international colloquia, some of these being partially financed by the European Commission, have been organised in co-operation with member associations on many subjects.

Berlin (1993): East West Dialog on Democracy - Human Rights - Humanism

Oslo (1995): Dignity of Life - Dignity of Death

Utrecht (1996): European seminar on Humanist Dialogue

Varsovie (1996): Humanist Vision of European Integration

Utrecht (1998): Multicultural society

Bruxelles (2000): L'éthique des affaires: pour une économie à visage humain

Ostende (2001) : La société civile en Europe - Le rôle et l'action de la EHF-FHE et de ses membres

Noordwijkerhout (2002) : Développer l'humanisme en Europe

Varsovie (2002) : Humanism and democracy in Central Europe

Bruxelles (2003) : Islam et musulmans dans l'espace européen : défis de la laïcité

Rome (2003): La constitution européenne, la laïcité indispensable

Bruxelles (2004): L'Europe, une chance pour la femme musulmane

Bruxelles (2004); L'influence de la droite religieuse sur les politiques internationales et européennes en matière de sexualité et d'avortement

Istanbul (2005): Laïcité, l'expérience belge

Berlin (2005): The limits of religious freedom

Varsovie (2005): OSCE, 2005 human dimension implementation meeting

Luxembourg (2005) Être jeune en Europe

Paris (2005): Quelles sont les propositions pour la laïcité dans l'Union européenne, quels partenariats et quelles modalités pour y parvenir ?.

Bruxelles (2005) La laïcité dans tous ses Etats. Laïcité et sécularisation dans l'Union européenne.

Bruxelles (2006) OSCE: NGO International Conference

Conclusion

The aims of EHF-FHE are "to promote a humanist vision of cultural, social and ethical values in Europe and to work for social and cultural progress."

To achieve these aims, the Association aims more particularly :

- to carry out educational, scientific and cultural action; - to promote more particularly in Europe the place of voluntary organisations developing the same objectives;
- to represent its member organisations to the European Institutions (e.g. Council of Ministers, Commission of the European Union, European Parliament, European Economic and Social Committee, European Committee for Security and Co-operation, Council of Europe, etc...) on all questions related with the aims here above defined;
- to promote exchanges among members and the circulation of information and experience which shall contribute to the development of humanist values in Europe
- to propose such European legislation as is likely to facilitate the development and promotion of the activities of member organisations in Europe;
- to publish statements on initiatives and areas of interest common to all member organisations relating to the European Institutions;
- to promote the development of co-operation among member organisations.

The working plans promote three main permanent priorities, they all have the defence of secularism and humanism in common:

European Institutions:

Development of synergies for action with the members and IHEU.

Enhancement of EHF visibility and capacity for action.

Defending secularism and humanism becomes an absolute priority to guarantee pluralism in society. Taking into account the internal organisation of the Union (European council of ministers and institutions), our actions have to be carried out in most cases on two levels. On the one hand there is the level of the institutions (EHF is in charge of this) and on the other hand we have the level of the governments of the member states (the member organisations have to deal with these).

Some important actions have been performed in this way, in close collaboration between members and EHF, with a particular attention to the campaigns "for withdrawal of article 51"

In 2005, the Board of Directors had an official meeting with the president of the European Commission which indicated the official representativity of EHF, as representative of the "non confessional".

Brussels, June 2006

A few pictures