

EUROPEAN HUMANIST FEDERATION

GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2011

REPORT ON ACTIVITY 2010/11

This report covers the period from March 2010 to March 2011 under three headings: (1) external campaigning work, (2) promoting the visibility of Humanism and Secularism in Europe, and (3) management and development.

1. External Campaigning Work

As before, we have concentrated our campaigning work on the European institutions but have also included work at the national level both within and outside Europe.

(a) EU Commission

Article 17 Dialogue The churches responded to the ratification of the Lisbon treaty with a submission looking forward to a “deepening and widening” of the dialogue with “a further increase in the already high level of readiness of EU civil servants or politicians to engage in a dialogue with the churches”. Meantime our letter to President Barroso (reported in last year’s annual report) seeking a fresh and non-discriminatory start to the dialogue received a delayed and nugatory reply from an official. Moreover, the Commission withdrew its earlier offer of support for a conference (attempts to fix a date for which had already stretched over more than a year) when we told them that we wished the subject to be “Religion and Belief in Democratic Societies: Issues of Equality and Freedom”, which they persistently interpreted as being about our views on religion rather than about human rights and non-discrimination. Unable to change their minds, we are now pursuing instead the possibility of a small-scale ‘dialogue seminar’ with Commission officials.

The Commission President, in association with the president of the Parliament and the permanent president of the Council, invited us to their second annual encounter with non-confessional organisations, held before and over lunch on October 15. Most of those invited were again Freemasons from a range of lodges and grand orients, many of which in fact require belief in some form of deity. We asked to be allowed to suggest people from our member organisations to be invited but were rejected: invitations are in the hands of the Commission President and he invited the same small selection of humanist and secularist guests as in 2009, including the EHF and two of our member organisations. The agenda was also set by the Commission: poverty and social exclusion. The EHF president spoke about the empirical evidence that the incidence of all manner of social ills correlates with inequality of income.

The inequality of the treatment we receive by comparison with the churches is blatant but it is multiplied by the extreme disproportion of resources, with the churches, subsidised by governments to the tune of over €1,000,000,000 a year, employing numbers of lobbyists in Brussels alone while our whole administration is run on a shoe-string, mainly by volunteers. A critical paper, *Article 17: Reasons for Concern*, was submitted by our President to an academic conference in November and is published on our website.

Responses to EU initiatives The draft directive on non-discrimination is making slow progress if any, with some national governments apparently determined to block it. We referred to our member organisations an initial Commission consultation (COM(2010) 747 final) "Less bureaucracy for citizens" about promoting mutual recognition of official civil status records such as birth and marriage certificates. This is being opposed by some religious groups as promoting recognition of IVF births and civil partnerships.

Fundamental Rights Agency The Fundamental Rights Agency is an EU body based in Vienna. The annual meeting of its NGO Platform was held in April and attended by Hans Christian Cars, who was an unsuccessful candidate in a highly competitive election for the NGO Advisory Panel. The meeting dealt with several human rights issues such as poverty and exclusion, implications of the Lisbon Treaty, access to justice, children's and women's rights and migration. Discussed also were the strategic objectives of the FRA until 2012 and the draft annual work programme for 2011.

EHF supports the work of the FRA but is dissatisfied with its lack of attention to cases where human rights are impaired or violated because of religious oppression. We have commented on this to the FRA, particularly in relation to its annual report, but a change of priorities will, we suspect, require political pressure at a high level.

(b) EU Council of Ministers

Under the Lisbon Treaty there are now two Presidents of the Council of Ministers: one (semi-)permanent and the other the previous six-monthly revolving national presidency.

Our correspondence with officials in the *cabinet* of the latter, Herman van Rompuy, (reported last year) continued and culminated in a friendly informal meeting.

The first revolving presidency of 2010 was held by Spain. Our requests for a meeting came to nothing. However, we were invited to a conference on "Freedom of Religion in Democratic Societies" in Cordoba in May which was jointly sponsored by the Spanish presidency and the UN Alliance of Civilisations. Our president submitted a paper, attended and contributed to the plenary and workshop sessions, not least having to point out that the conference documents and speakers repeatedly ignored non-religious beliefs. *A follow-up conference is referred to below in the section on the Council of Europe.*

The second 2010 Presidency was held by Belgium, and we were delighted to be received by the Prime Minister of Belgium, albeit in the final days of his presidency. We see this meeting as setting a precedent for the future: the churches have met each of the Council presidencies for many years and in future we should receive equal treatment. We are currently seeking to fix a date with the Hungarian presidency, the first of 2011, and we have written to Poland, the second 2011 presidency.

(c) European Parliament

Article 17 The 'Article 17' mandate for a dialogue with belief groups applies to all EU institutions including the Parliament. Following a speech by the President of the Parliament, Jerzy Buzek, we wrote to him seeking a meeting to discuss the practicalities. He invited us to put proposals in writing. We later had an informal meeting with a member of his *cabinet* but have still to take things forward. President Buzek meantime, having ruled out of order a parliamentary question put by Nikolaos Chountis MEP asking what the Commission would do to prevent those of "extreme conservative views on the pretext of freedom of conscience" frustrating women's rights to abortion and other treatment, has now invited the Pope to address a plenary session of the Parliament - an arrangement that evoked a letter of protest from the EPPSP about misuse of a plenary session.

European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Politics The EPPSP, chaired by Sophie in't Veld MEP, has continued to meet regularly, with speakers addressing substantial lunchtime audiences on Child abuse and the Catholic Church (May), Conscientious Objection in Medicine (September - with Christine McCafferty talking about her report for the PACE Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee: see below), EU dialogue with churches and non-confessional organisations (November), Religion and the EU Anti-discrimination Directive (February) and the Lautsi case (March). The EHF has continued to chair the small EPPSP Advisory Board.

Alliance for a Secular Europe A tactical defeat in October in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) (see below) led the EPPSP Advisory Board to decide to create a wide network of humanist, secularist, human rights, LGBT, pro-choice, women's and other organisations across Europe that were individually liable to find themselves opposed by reactionary religious interests and that would therefore be inclined to support secularism in European politics. The idea is to provide a means of raising alerts and maximising support for relevant causes in the European Parliament, PACE and elsewhere. The network, named the Alliance for a Secular Europe, was launched in February 2011 when well over 200 organisations were sent an invitation (in four languages) suggesting that they join an e-mail group. About 30 had joined by the end of March with more in the pipeline, and messages began flowing quickly.

(d) Council of Europe

We have continued to cooperate with the International Humanist and Ethical Union in representing Humanism at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg: we nominated Julien Houben as a member of the IHEU delegation in succession to Andrew Copson.

In April we asked members and supporters to lobby their national members of PACE in favour of a report, opposed by reactionary religious lobbies, on LGBT rights.

In August and again in September we wrote to members and supporters asking them to lobby in favour of a report from the PACE Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee on “Women’s access to lawful medical care: the problem of unregulated use of conscientious objection” which was being opposed (and grossly misrepresented) by Christian lobbyists; and in October we wrote to the many presidents and vice-presidents of all the party groups in PACE - and to individual PACE members whose email addresses we had urging - support of the proposed resolution. Sadly many supportive members of PACE failed to attend the debate and in a narrow vote the resolution was amended incoherently to include expressions of unqualified support for conscientious objection not only by individuals but by institutions.

We subsequently consulted with a coalition of concerned organisations and wrote to party groups deploring the result and to supporters and member organisations pointing the moral that we all need to “put more energy into actively defending the freedoms we have won in recent decades”. *See also above on the Alliance for a Secular Europe.*

Our Board member Jean de Brueker and Pierre-Arnaud Perrouty from the Centre d’Action Laïque (CAL) represented us at a major conference on “Freedom of Expression, Conscience and Religion” in Lisbon on 4-5 November, jointly sponsored by the Council of Europe and the UN Alliance of Civilisations. They tabled a paper on Freedom of Expression and Related Issues.

We have for some years been represented jointly with CAL at annual Council of Europe meetings on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue by Jean de Brueker: he attended meetings in September and February on the role of the media in intercultural dialogue.

Coincidentally we discovered in February that the PACE Committee on Culture, Science and Education was preparing a report on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue and we submitted a paper to the Committee on “Religion and Belief in 21st Century Europe”. As a result our President was invited at short notice to join representatives of the churches and of Judaism and Islam at a meeting of the Committee in Paris. He also submitted, through one of the committee members, a series of comments on the draft report. The

resulting Committee report to the full Parliamentary Assembly, is admirably even-handed as between religious and non-religious lifestances and proposes “establishing a platform for dialogue/partnership between the Council of Europe, the religious faiths and the chief humanist organisations”.

On 24-25 March Julien Houben represented EHF at a wide-ranging NGO conference in Istanbul on “New multicultural challenges : how can NGOs play their part?”

(e) European Court of Human Rights

Lautsi v Italy In this case the European Court of Human Rights found in November 2009 that Italy’s law requiring the display of crucifixes in every state school classroom was an infringement of parents’ right to bring up their children in the belief of their wish. Italy appealed and there was a hearing in the Grand Chamber in June. The EHF submitted a closely argued third party intervention but it was rejected by the Court. After an unusually long delay the Court’s final judgement was issued in March, completely reversing the original finding and ruling that there was no abuse of human rights: although “the crucifix is above all a religious symbol” its display was passive and the Court had no evidence of its effect on pupils; and the matter lay within the “margin of appreciation” allowed to states in their implementation of their human rights obligations.

This disappointing judgement had been expected in view of the huge political campaign against the original decision. We described it in our press release as “a lost opportunity” and said:

This highly regrettable judgement retreats from the clarity of the initial ruling that the State and its institutions must be impartial, not favouring one religion or belief over another. This principle is particularly important when the State is addressing school pupils, since they are not only immature and impressionable but also a captive audience.

It is to be hoped that the judges were not yielding to the huge political pressure put on them by Italy and what looked like a Holy Alliance’ of Catholic and Orthodox states that backed its appeal and by the Vatican, the Greek Orthodox Church and other reactionary religious interests whose fears of losing influence in an increasingly secular Europe will have been abated by this judgement . . .

However, the ruling runs so contrary to the established direction of Oeducational policy in the Council of Europe and the OSCE and to the proclaimed secularism of the EU that it is unlikely to have a lasting effect. Europeans are voting with their feet, leaving the churches and giving little

value to religion.

(f) Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe

This has been a year of overlap between Vera Pegna and her successor as our representative with OSCE, Hans Christian Cars.

Guidelines for Legislation We submitted substantial and extensive comments on the OSCE Guidelines for Review of Legislation pertaining to Religion or Belief, which are being revised by their panel of experts. We now await their proposed redraft.

ODIHR Review Conference: October: Warsaw The first session of this review conference this year took the place of the usual Human Dimension Implementation Meeting. The EHF attended the session on "freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief" in October. In the plenary session, David Pollock attacked the "undiplomatic behaviour" of the Holy See, claiming that in its attempt to cover up the scandal of child abuse by some priests it actively frustrated the application of the law in other states, it deliberately ensured that serious criminal offences alleged against its employees were not reported to the police, it sheltered criminals from prosecution, sometimes helping remove them from the jurisdiction of the states where they offended, and it failed to take any effective action to protect the human rights of those abused by its criminal priests.

Vera Pegna spoke (for our Italian member organisation the Unione degli Atei e degli Agnostici Razionalisti) about the way an Italian festival traditionally associated with the unification of Italy and the overthrow of the Papal States became this year a celebration of the state's links with the Catholic church. We held a side meeting in the evening on "The Position of Non-Religious People in Europe: The Lautsi Case and Wider Considerations". David Pollock spoke on the Lautsi case and Vera Pegna on the wider picture. We also contributed significantly to a meeting with the OSCE's Advisory Panel on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Special Human Dimension Implementation Meeting: December: Vienna We were represented at this meeting in December by Hans Christian Cars, whose intervention was about the distinction between education about religions and religious indoctrination, and by Vera Pegna, who spoke in the plenary session on pluralism, relativism and the rule of law and on the display of crucifixes in public buildings.

(f) Other Campaigning Work

Application to UN for Accreditation

Our application of May 2009 to the UN for accreditation as an NGO has still not been decided by the relevant committee, which meets only rarely and seems addicted to

postponing decisions by asking a succession of apparently irrelevant questions. We remain hopeful that it will be decided shortly.

Other interventions

We continued to write directly to governments where it seemed appropriate.

- In July we wrote to President Dmitry Medvedev over the guilty verdict on the directors of two art galleries over putting on a controversial art exhibition.
- In August we wrote to the relevant Nigerian state police commissioner over the latest in a series of highly questionable failures to protect Leo Igwe and his family.
- Also in August, we wrote to the Prime Minister of Moldova urging against a proposal to introduce instruction in Orthodox Christianity in schools.
- In December, after consultation with Austrian secularist organisations, we wrote to the Chancellor of Austria asking for the Zentralrat der Konfessionsfreien Österreichs to be consulted in the same way as religious organisations. We received a reply from the Chancellor's office assuring us that the need for equal treatment was recognised.
- We helped finance Rebecca Hybbinette, the chair of our Swedish member organisation Humanisterna, to attend a major conference in Cairo in December on "Women and the 21st Century – Feminist Alternatives", where she spoke of Humanist support for a secular democratic society, underlining the importance of not allowing religion to exercise political power. A follow-up conference in Sweden is being discussed.
- We were represented in a new initiative when a British group, All Faiths and None, convened in January a new inter-convictional group and approached the European Commission for possible funding. Georges Liénard is our representative with this group so as to ensure proper liaison with the existing G3i - the similar *International, Intercultural, Interconvictional* group on which he already represents us.
- In March, at the request of the Maltese Humanist Association, we wrote to all MPs in Malta urging them to approve a proposal for a referendum on the introduction of divorce, which is currently impossible.

2. Promoting the Visibility of Humanism and Secularism in Europe

(a) Website

David Pollock has continued to edit and update the website on which copies of all significant correspondence by EHF are posted together with reports of meetings and

conferences. Our plans for a new design of website ran into problems and eventually early in 2011 we contracted with a small company in London to produce a new website which we hope will be available in the near future.

(b) Conferences and Meetings

Conference on Women and Religion Following our general assembly in May we held an interesting conference on women and religion in Stockholm in association with Humanisterna - the Swedish Humanist Association - and European Humanist Professionals, with Maria Hagberg, a sociologist from EQUITA (Sweden), speaking on Religion and Women's Rights, Eduardo Grutzky, ALMA Europa and Swedish Humanist Association, on the oppression of women in religious contexts, and Azar Majedi from England, who is President of Organisation for Women's Liberation-Iran, talking on inherent misogyny in religion, with a special focus on Islam. Sara Mohammad, from a project against honour related violence in Sweden, spoke on political Islam, cultural relativism and the problem with honour related violence; and Monika Karbowska, from RACJA (Reason of the Polish Left) on the Catholic Church's political influence over women in Poland. Finally we heard from Elfriede Harth (from Germany and from Catolicas por el Derecho a Decidir de España - Catholics for the Right to Decide, Spain) on "Organizing resistance of women against religious oppression in their faith community: the case of Catholicism". These addresses were followed by two parallel workshops,

Thinking Freely about Europe These monthly lunch-debates continued through the year. This is a cultural club recognised by the European Commission and linked to EHF that aims at fostering, in Brussels, a network of people having close connections with the European institutions and at guaranteeing a permanent visibility for humanism among the civil servants of the European institutions and the public interested in European matters.

3. Management and Development of EHF

Administration For another year, the President has in effect also filled the role of General Secretary, working close to full time to meet the demands of that role. In addition we continued to have the invaluable support of the international unit of the Centre d'Action Laïque (Belgium) and the occasional services of an intern working in the office of the British Humanist Association, to whom we are grateful. The EHF has therefore continued despite its minimal resources to work effectively for secularism in Europe.

Board The Board of Directors met six times:

- on 27 and 28 May in Stockholm, hosted by Humanisterna
- on 6 August
- on 30 October

- on 22 January
- on 5 March,

these last four meetings being held in Brussels and generously hosted by the Centre d'Action Laïque.

At the General Assembly in Stockholm Suzy Mommaerts and Andrew Copson had reached the end of their terms of office and did not stand again, and Marianne Marchand was no longer eligible as a board member when her sponsoring organisation, Vrijzinnig Trefpunt, ceased activities. We placed on record our thanks to Suzy Mommaerts for her long service as treasurer. In their place we elected four new members: Naomi Philips (British Humanist Association, UK), Marina Van Haeren (Unie Vrijzinnige Verenigingen, Belgium), Renate Bauer (Dachverband Freier Weltanschauungsgemeinschaften, Germany) and Hans Christian Cars (Humanisterna, Sweden).

In July we suffered the loss of Tryntsje de Groot who died tragically young from cancer.

Towards the end of the year, Luc Devuyst, another long-serving member of the Board, decided to retire.

The current composition of the Board is therefore as follows:

President: David Pollock (British Humanist Association, United Kingdom)

Vice-Presidents: Pierre Galand (Centre d'Action Laïque, Belgium) and Staffan Gunnarson (Humanisterna, Sweden)

Treasurer: Jean de Brueker (Centre d'Action Laïque, Belgium)

Members: Renate Bauer (Dachverband Freier Weltanschauungsgemeinschaften, Germany); Rob Buitenweg (Humanistisch Verbond, Netherlands); Hans Christian Cars (Humanisterna, Sweden); Marina Van Haeren (Unie Vrijzinnige Verenigingen, Belgium); Julien Houben (Unione degli Atei e degli Agnostici Razionalisti, Italy); Naomi Phillips (British Humanist Association, United Kingdom); Werner Schultz (Humanistischer Verband Deutschlands, Germany); Baard Thalberg (Human-Etisk Forbund, Norway).

We have hitherto not paid travelling or hotel expenses to Board Members attending board meetings and General Assemblies, relying instead on sponsoring member organisations to do so. We were aware, however, that some organisations did not have the financial resources to do so, and at the end of the year we decided to introduce discretionary contributions to expenses where member organisations were unable.

Finance The accounts for 2010 show a recovery in income as membership subscriptions overdue from previous years were collected and the rate of collection for the current year

was improved. We also received a generous donation of €2,500 from Vrijzinnig Trefpunt (Belgium) when it ceased activities.

Paradoxically our spending was reduced from the previous year, partly owing to caution but mainly because (a) we have insufficient resources to employ even a part-time member of staff; (b) we have insufficient volunteers willing to undertake work on the basis of reimbursement of expenses; and (c) if we should succeed in obtaining grant finance for a project (for example, from the EU) it would almost certainly be conditional on our providing part of the cost and, with retrospective reimbursement the rule, would require that we were able to finance the project until payments came to hand.

However, the Board are now examining the possibility of financing a limited project to promote the EHF and have also agreed in principle to employ someone for limited periods to speak for us (and IHEU) at the NGO meetings associated with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Membership

At the General Assembly in Stockholm we were pleased to welcome into membership the Humanist Union of Greece. During the year the following organisations applied for membership and are recommended for approval by the Membership Committee:

Égale (France)

Central London Humanist Group (UK)

Russian Humanist Society (Russia)

Good Sense (Russia)

Allianz vun Humanisten, Atheisten an Agnostiker Lëtzebuerg (Luxembourg)

Associazione del Libero Pensiero "Giordano Bruno" (Italy)

Fundatia Central Pentru Constiinta Critica (CCC) (Romania)

The addition of these to our present 42 members would bring the total to 49. However, there are two or three member organisations that have ceased to reply to emails and that we suspect have ceased to function. This is something we shall investigate further in the coming year.

We are also in touch with a number of other organisations - mostly in the process of formation - that we hope will in future join us.

We have in addition a small number of supporting (individual) members.

Future Developments We spent time at several Board meetings discussing proposals for

medium-term development put forward by Hans Christian Cars and continue to take this forward.

Policy We were pleased that IHEU adopted a policy on education that (with very minor variations of wording that we subsequently adopted) was identical with ours. We are developing a policy on conscientious objection.

Yahoo Groups We continue to rely on our two Yahoo groups for almost all communications with members and supporters. It is a matter of concern that even some member organisations which are certainly still functioning have failed to register even one representative in the ehffhemo group and thus fail to receive important communications from us. It is worth stressing that:

- (a) almost all formal communications to members are sent vis the ehffhemo Yahoo group;
- (b) a member organisation may nominate as many members of staff and of its governing body as it wishes to join the ehffhemo group;
- (c) all members and supporters of all member organisations and all other supporters of humanism and secularism are welcome to join the ehffhe-info Yahoo group and to participate in the exchange of information and discussions that it hosts.

Liaison with IHEU Meetings between representatives of EHF and IHEU have continued through the year, improving relations and cooperation. We also exchange copies of the minutes of our Board and of the minutes of the IHEU Executive Committee.

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