

# EUROPEAN HUMANIST FEDERATION

## GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2012

### REPORT ON ACTIVITY 2011/12

This report covers the period from March 2011 to March 2012 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. The Board has agreed that the EHF *works in the interest of* people who share its values but (other than in relation to members of our member organisations) not to claim to speak *on behalf of them*.

##### **(a) EU Commission**

###### Article 17 Dialogue

We have continued to be seriously dissatisfied with the approach of the office of the President of the EU Commission to the dialogue under Article 17 TFEU. We reported last year that this office, known as BEPA - the Bureau of European Policy Advisors - withdrew their offer of a sponsored conference when we told them that we wished the subject to be "Religion and Belief in Democratic Societies: Issues of Equality and Freedom". We wished to explore the conflicts that can occur between freedom of religion or belief and equality and non-discrimination but they persistently misinterpreted us as wishing to air our views on religion. They suggested that in lieu of a conference we should have a "dialogue seminar" - a small meeting at which the EHF and invited independent experts would meet relevant Commission experts - on a suitable subject.

However, when we suggested as the subject "Competing Rights Issues in Europe" they again blankly refused to proceed: "a dialogue seminar on freedom of religion and of belief is not appropriate". We attempted by informal approaches over a period of months to change their minds but in vain. At the end of September we wrote direct to President Barroso asking for his intervention, but when we had had no acknowledgement or reply within two weeks we submitted a complaint to the EU Ombudsman and sent out a press release. The Belgian daily *Le Soir* gave the story extensive coverage.

This resulted in an instant but temporising reply from the Commission, but within a few weeks they had agreed to a meeting on the subject we had proposed - though they have subsequently maintained that the meeting will not be a "dialogue seminar". We have not so far been able to fix a date for the meeting but hope that it will take place shortly.

Meantime the Ombudsman accepted our complaint and put it - along with some penetrating questions of his own - to the Commission. We have recently been forwarded their reply and will respond to this, after which the Ombudsman will produce his decision.

But the saga of the dialogue seminar is only one aspect of our dissatisfaction with the way the Article 17 dialogue is organised. On November 30 we were invited to the annual 'summit' meeting with the presidents of the Commission, Council and Parliament at the Berlaymont building. But once again the EHF and its member organisations were treated demeaningly. Requests from member organisations to be invited to the meeting were ignored; the BEPA insisted that selecting whom to invite was its prerogative, and it invited once again twice as many freemasons as representatives of the EHF and its member organisations. At the meeting, the freemasons were given precedence.

In his eventual intervention, EHF President David Pollock said:

Insofar as you are looking for an ethical input to policy considerations, the humanist contribution is equally valid with religious views. Often, indeed, we will agree on ethical questions - such a poverty or climate change. Indeed, if the different religions can sit side by side to contribute on such matters despite their differences, there is no reason why the humanists also should not do so. But if the Commission requires that we non-confessionals have a separate dialogue, then it must be an equal one - equal in length of meetings, equal in access to officials, equal in recognition and standing. This has not hitherto been our experience. We had to press for meetings before they were granted, although the churches had been having meetings for years. Our meetings - such as this one - are typically shorter than the meetings with bishops. Our request for a dialogue seminar was rejected for six months and accepted only after we complained to the Ombudsman.

We suggest that a new start is required. It is perhaps opportune that BEPA will have a new official in charge of the dialogue, which offers the possibility of a more balanced and open approach, and that the EHF will, after next May, have a new President as I am reaching the end of my term of office. The new start, we suggest, should involve a more collaborative approach. There should be consultation about the subjects for these meetings. There should also be consultation about who is invited. The dialogue is meant to be open, but two of our Member Organisations tell me that when they asked this year to take part, one did not get even an acknowledgement, and the other got no substantive reply, let alone an invitation.

On a related point, the European Humanist Federation warmly welcomes the secularist Freemasons as allies, and we are looking forward to much closer collaboration in the near future, albeit some of the institutions represented at these meetings, though secularist, are not in fact non-confessional. But the balance of invitations is in our view quite disproportionate.

In summary, if the Commission wishes to shape its policy to appeal to the citizens of Europe, it must remember - as repeated Eurobarometer surveys have shown - that the values espoused by those citizens are human rights, democracy, peace, and the rule of law, respect for other cultures, solidarity, equality and tolerance. All these and more are consistently put ahead of religion, which always comes last with a declining score. And these are humanist values such as the European Humanist Federation espouses,

suggesting that we rather than the churches can claim to be representative of typical Europeans.

In the interest of the closer cooperation with the Freemasons referred to above, the EHF has made approaches to the Grand Orients of France and Belgium among others seeking cooperation. It is too early to say yet what will be the outcome.

#### Responses to EU initiatives

During the year we responded to two consultations by the EU Commission - one on research policy (we insisted that the current restrictions on using EU finance for any work that uses embryonic stem cells must be modified and protested against a proposal from the Vatican that research be commissioned specifically to find evidence to support its contentious position on the traditional family); the other on illegal drugs.

In our response on drugs, we deplored the lack of new thinking in the Commission's draft proposals and called for recognition that current policies were getting nowhere:

The counterproductive nature of current policies is now widely recognised. Politicians and senior police officers not infrequently speak openly of the damage being done by current practices. The Global Commission on Drug Policy, with a most eminent membership from the worlds of politics and finance as well as human rights, produced a devastating report last June which opened uncompromisingly: "The global war on drugs has failed, with devastating consequences for individuals and societies around the world". Some states - such as the Netherlands and Portugal - have experimented with liberal regimes, eliminating much of the collateral damage that arises from criminalisation of drugs without incurring serious damage to the lives and health of drug users or other people.

We asked for serious consideration of radically new policies based on legalisation and controlled supply of drugs.

#### Fundamental Rights Agency

We were represented by Hans Christian Cars at the EU Fundamental Rights Agency's large annual meeting with NGOs, which was held in Vienna on 14-15 April.

#### ***(b) EU Council of Ministers***

After last year's breakthrough when the Belgian 'revolving' presidency met our representatives, we continued in 2011 with meetings in Budapest and Warsaw with the Hungarian and Polish presidencies. At these meetings we raised both matters on the current EU agenda and issues concerning the relevant government's domestic policies. Full reports were published on the EHF website.

Denmark holds the presidency for the first half of 2012 but has at the time of writing not arranged any meeting either with the churches or with us. Given our principled opposition to the Article 17 dialogue, we regard this as a desirable development and hope that future

presidencies copy the Danes.

### ***(c) European Parliament***

#### Article 17 Dialogue

Not only the Commission and Council but also the European Parliament is expected to implement dialogue under Article 17 TFEU, and the EHF was represented at a conference organised by Veronique de Keyser MEP on October 20 to discuss the response of the non-confessional organisations to Article 17.

After a meeting with the religions in May, the then President of the Parliament, Jerzy Buzek, called a meeting with the 'philosophical and non-confessional organisations' in the afternoon of November 30, immediately following the lunchtime meeting with the three Presidents referred to above. This was chaotically organised, with invitations issued late and randomly, with three of the four invited speakers freemasons and two of them saying their invitation had come only the previous evening, and with vice-president Laszlo Tokes mishandling the meeting from the start to the extent that Sophie in't Veld, attending as president of the European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Politics, felt compelled to walk out. The fourth speaker was EHF president David Pollock, who strongly criticised the conduct of the meeting and said that as it stood the dialogue was neither regular, nor open nor transparent - the requirements in the Treaty - before making some constructive suggestions for future proceedings.

Since then the Parliament has elected a new president, Martin Schulz MEP, who has responded to letters from the EHF and the EPPSP in ways that suggest he intends a more open and even-handed approach - see below.

#### European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Politics

The EHF has continued to support the EPPSP and to chair its Advisory Board. The Platform has met six times since the last report: it was addressed in June by the Italian judge Luigi Tosti who has been battling against having to sit in courtrooms under a crucifix; in June the speaker was the then European Parliament president Jerzy Buzek, who was subjected to lively questioning; in October the subject was EU foreign policy; and in February the subject was education and religion. In March, the new European Parliament president Martin Schulz was the guest speaker and gave welcome reassurances that he recognised the need for secularism in the European institutions. He said that he saw the European Parliament's contribution to "Article 17" as facilitating dialogue between religious and non-religious representatives in a context of mutual respect.

#### Other contacts

Separately from the Platform, the EHF maintains regular contacts with MEPs in the different political groups.

#### Alliance for a Secular Europe

This network of organisations, set up at the beginning of 2011, provides the means to coordinate information and action in opposition to reactionary religious forces. It promises to be a useful initiative and now has over 80 organisations in membership but should ideally have many more. Administration of the Alliance is handled by the EHF on behalf of

its sponsor, the EPPSP Advisory Board.

#### ***(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. Board member Julien Houben has continued as our nominated member of their delegation through out 2011/12 and latterly David Pollock and Renate Bauer have been added to the IHEU delegation.

Julien Houben attended the meeting of INGOs on 20-22 June 2011, and he, David Pollock and Renate Bauer attended the meeting on 25-26 January 2012. Julien served as a member of the working group of the INGOs' Human Rights Committee that is about to produce a report on religion and human rights.

In addition, Jean de Brueker (representing the Centre d'Action Laïque) took part in the meeting of the Lisbon Forum on 3-4 November 2011 on "The Arab Spring: a major step towards making universal human rights real", and he and David Pollock took part in the annual intercultural dialogue conference organised on behalf of the Committee of Ministers in Luxembourg on November 28-29: this was the second meeting on the influence of the media on intercultural relations.

The Council of Europe operates at four levels in what it calls a 'quadrilogue': the INGOs are one level and the other three are the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly and the congress of the local and regional government. We reported last year that the PACE Committee on Culture, Science and Education had prepared a report on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue to which we had contributed. The Parliamentary Assembly accepted all its recommendations at its meeting in April 2011 but regrettably the Committee of Ministers rejected in January the recommendation of a new platform for high-level dialogue between religion and non-confessional beliefs.

The Parliamentary Assembly showed again in January the need for better organisation of opposition to the reactionary religious minority when a good resolution on living wills was hijacked in a poorly attended late evening session to include a total condemnation of euthanasia.

#### ***(e) Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe***

Vera Pegna represented EHF at a meeting on combating hate crimes against Christians held in Rome in September 2011. She spoke vigorously on the way that some Christians - notably the Roman Catholic Church - brought hatred on their own heads:

Ladies and gentlemen, do you think that people wake up one fine morning and decide to hate Christians – or Catholics rather – out of the blue, for no specific reason? Isn't it that maybe the Catholic church has done something unpleasant to them, like disseminating hate against the Jews for centuries by calling them perfidious and a deicide people? Or maybe covering up sex abuse on children committed by its clergy? Or claiming huge amounts of public funds and special rights and privileges that are at loggerheads with

democracy and the rule of law? Or disparaging and smearing 30 to 50% of the European population made up of non-believers?

The EHF was represented at the 2011 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw by David Pollock, Hans Christian Cars, Vera Pegna (for the Unione degli Atei e degli Agnostici Razionalisti (UAAR)) and Pierre-Arnaud Perrouty (for the Centre d'Action Laïque). David Pollock spoke on 'A Vindication of the Blank Wall', rejecting the argument seriously advanced in the Lautsi case that "An empty wall in an Italian classroom is no more neutral—indeed, it is far less so—than is a wall with a crucifix upon it". Pierre-Arnaud Perrouty spoke on the need to be rid of blasphemy laws. Vera Pegna strongly questioned the abusive response to the EHF's paper on Religion in Society from the Observatory for Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians, and at a later session criticised ongoing attempts at eroding the tenets of democracy and the rule of law by religious representatives who believed that their moral doctrine was the only source of morality and should therefore be enforced by law: the Holy See exercised its right of reply.

Hans Christian Cars chaired our well attended side meeting at which David Pollock spoke on "How can Freedom of Religion and Belief be reconciled with Equality & Non-Discrimination in Democratic Societies?"

It is disturbing that the draft revision of the OSCE's Guidelines for Review of Legislation pertaining to Religion or Belief, of which we had good hopes and which we believe was completed by the OSCE's expert panel about a year ago, seem to have disappeared in to the organisation's bureaucracy.

### ***(f) Other Campaigning Work***

#### Application to UN for Accreditation

Our application for accreditation to the United Nations (which would allow us to attend and speak at the Human Rights Council) reaches its third anniversary in May 2012 but continues to be blocked by Islamic countries who raise large numbers of seemingly irrelevant questions at every meeting of the vetting committee.

#### Other interventions

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

- Having in March 2011 written to Prime Minister of Hungary about aspects of the new draft Constitution unfavourable to the non-religious and to women, in July 2011 we wrote again about repressive new law on registration of religions.
- In April 2011 we wrote to the Polish prosecution service about a case against demonstrators who had decorated a cross with beer cans.
- In July 2011 we wrote to the Prime Minister of Poland about an oppressive bill on abortion.
- In October 2011 we wrote to the secretary-general of the Commonwealth on the need for it to promote LGBT rights.
- In November 2011 we wrote jointly with the International Humanist and Ethical Union and Humanisterna, our Swedish member organisation, to the Swedish authorities asking them to reverse their decision to deport atheist blogger Khalid

Saeed back to Pakistan where he was liable to persecution as an apostate from Islam.

#### Collaboration with European Feminist Initiative

At a meeting of the Board we consulted Rebecca Hybbinette (who represented EHF at the 2010 conference on women's rights in Cairo organised by the European Feminist Initiative) on ways to follow up with joint sponsorship with Humanisterna and EFI of another conference, perhaps in Europe, to help women articulate their secularism.

## **2. Promoting the Visibility of Humanism and Secularism in Europe**

### ***(a) Website***

We have published the new much-improved website which is attracting considerably more traffic than the previous version. It includes new content in the Country Profiles, which give information about countries' constitutional arrangements for church/state relations, fuller information on member organisations, and 'notes and cuttings' on the country of a less formal nature.

### ***(b) Newsletter***

We have published three issues of our new email Newsletter which is produced for us by the international unit of the Centre d'Action Laïque.

### ***(c) Conferences and Meetings***

We held a successful General Assembly and conference in Genova, where our hosts were the Unione degli Atei e degli Agnostici Razionalisti. The General Assembly was held in the magnificent Palazzo Tursi where we were welcomed by the Mayor of Genova. The conference on Moral Foundations in A Godless World was held in the equally splendid Palazzo Ducale and attended by over 400 people. It attracted extensive coverage in *La Repubblica*. Pievani Telmo warned against recognising the church as a moral authority, an attitude which he saw as typical of many lay people with a moral inferiority complex. Giulio Giorello identified this as originating in the paternalistic teaching of Voltaire and Kant who saw the idea of God as a guarantee of morality. Gilberto Corbellini said that the naturalistic, scientific approach was able to explain any human activity and Simone Pollo spoke of how ideas of morality were often stretched so as to coincide with the norm. UAAR honorary president Valerio Pocar spoke on freedom of expression and research, and British Humanist Association vice-president A C Grayling spoke on liberal education. The main conference was followed by a workshop on "The Ethics of Responsibility".

## **3. Management and Development of EHF**

### Administration

The President has continued to fill the role of General Secretary, working close to full time, but with invaluable support from the international unit of the Centre d'Action Laïque (Belgium) to which in anticipation of his retirement from the Board he is in course of handing over responsibility.

## Board

The Board of Directors met six times: on 5 and 7 May 2011 in Genova before and following the General Assembly, on 12 August 2011 in Oslo, and on 15 October 2011, 21 January 2012 and 24 March 2012 in Brussels where we were generously hosted by the Centre d'Actin Laïque. We have devoted some time to planning for the future in an exercise led by Hans Christian Cars.

At the General Assembly in Genova Luc Devuyt retired after many years of long service. Staffan Gunnarson was re-elected for a new term of office, and Massimo Redaelli (UAAR) and Remus Cernea (Romanian Humanist Association) were elected as new board members. In January Naomi Phillips (British Humanist Association) resigned from the Board since she was leaving the employment of the BHA.

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)

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)

Remus Cernea (Romanian Humanist Association)

Marina Van Haeren (Unie Vrijzinnige Verenigingen, Belgium)

Julien Houben (Unione degli Atei e degli Agnostici Razionalisti, Italy)

Massimo Redaelli (UAAR)

Werner Schultz (Humanistischer Verband Deutschlands, Germany)

Baard Thalberg (Human-Etisk Forbund, Norway).

## Finance

In 2011 and the early months of 2012 we maintained a financially satisfactory situation, thanks to more regular payment of member organisations' subscriptions. Expenses were mainly related to supporting the organisation of our General Assembly and to covering the costs of lobbying and representation to the EU institutions.

Our lack of capacity to undertake extra work meant again that we were unable to undertake all the work we should have wished and thus we recorded another surplus of income over expenditure, amounting to just short of €13,250. However, our accumulated balance of €65,000 is now large enough for us to be able to contemplate *ad hoc* employment of people to undertake suitable research or other projects. We have already introduced a fund to help poorly resourced member organisations to travel to our General Assembly.

The accounts do not include any allowance for the services in kind received from member

organisations, in particular the valuable help we receive from the Belgian Centre d'Action Laïque, for which we express our warm thanks.

### Membership

The EHF has continued to expand, with seven new member organisations being approved at the General Assembly in 2011 and with new applications for membership in 2012 from:

Ateistisk Selskab (with which our existing member Humanistisk Debat has merged),  
Sweden  
Humanismo Secular Portugal, Portugal  
Freidenker-Vereinigung der Schweiz / Association Suisse des Libres Penseurs /  
Associazione Svizzera dei Liberi Pensatori, Switzerland  
La Ligue de l'Enseignement, France

We are particularly glad to welcome the Ligue de l'Enseignement back into membership after a lapse of six years.

### Policy

The Board has adopted a detailed policy statement on conscientious objection which has been posted on the website. It confronts the problem of aggressive use of conscientious objection by some religious people and organisations to assert or try to establish religious privileges and suggests an approach to reconciling freedom of religion or belief with equality and non-discrimination.

### Yahoo Groups

The EHF's two Yahoo groups have continued to function through the year, with the "Info" network seeing not only postings from the centre about EHF developments but also vigorous debate on a number of topics. The group is open to all members of our member organisations. The group for member organisations is used as the EHF's main channel of communication with its members and is open to all their staff and committee members. We wish to promote membership of both groups.

### Liaison with IHEU

Meetings between representatives of EHF and IHEU have continued through the year, improving relations and cooperation.

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