



## Colloquium on Secularism and Human Rights 16 April 2008

On April 16 2008 about 200 people attended our colloquium to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, held in the Centre A. Borschette in Brussels.

It was supported by the European Commission and we received considerable help in organising it from the Centre d'Action Laïque in Belgium.

The meeting was addressed by the Commission President, José Manuel Barroso. An EU-produced video of his speech may be seen on the EHF's YouTube channel [here](#).

Some of the speeches are posted here, but the whole proceedings, mostly in French, has been published as a book "**Humanism and Human Rights / Laïcité et Droits de l'Homme**", available from the EHF.

**8.45** Welcome

**9.15 Opening of the Colloquium by David Pollock, President of the EHF :**

May I welcome you all to what I am sure will be a very productive day.

First: let me thank on your behalf the European Commission for their support of this Colloquium, and in particular of course President Barroso who will be with us this afternoon. I must mention also Jorge César das Neves of the President's staff for his considerable help. Also I want for the EHF to thank the Centre d'Action Laïque here in Belgium for their collaboration and help in organising this event. And let me thank you also for supporting the event with your presence.

I have two notes to mention on the background to this meeting.

First, why are we – the European Humanist Federation – here as the guests of the European Commission? It is in accordance with the new Article 16C of the Maastricht Treaty, inserted in it by the Lisbon Treaty [NB: now Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union].

This is the Article that mandates the EU to "maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue" with the churches and what it calls "philosophical and non-confessional organisations" such as ourselves. We fought against this Article on principle over nearly a decade. We do not believe that the churches & other religious

institutions – or indeed humanists – have any legitimate ‘specific contribution’ to make to the affairs of the EU. What relevance is religion to the remits of the EU?

If you say churches are major organisations in our countries, then why not consult them under the same provisions as the EU has for consultation with civil society, NGOs and so on? Maybe because they are not internally democratic bodies – but should that mean that they get superior rights by comparison with properly representative bodies?

Nevertheless, that battle has been lost. The churches have for years been treated by the EU as if the Article were already in effect. Indeed, now the Lisbon Treaty has been agreed they are making a case for even more concessions! At a meeting last November the President of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Europe noted all the seminars, meetings and dialogues the churches already enjoyed but then said (and I quote) “These talks are indeed necessary but they alone are in our view not enough to satisfy the offer of an open, transparent and regular dialogue.”

In the circumstances, the EHF has decided that it needs to make use of the privileges on offer – if only to provide some counterbalance to the conservative religious lobby that dominates the EU dialogues with its determination to impose religious standards willy nilly on everyone, including the large number – a third or a half of the EU population – who have no religious beliefs.

- Impose their standards, that is,

- in matters of scientific research, at huge cost to people to people with dire diseases for which cures might be found by embryonic stem cell research
- around end-of-life issues, at huge cost to people facing a demeaning, painful and protracted death instead of a dignified departure at a time of their choosing
- in the denial of condoms to those suffering from HIV and AIDS, so spreading the disease to millions who need not have caught it
- in sexual behaviour, where they try to deny freedom to gays and lesbians and perpetuate prejudice and discrimination against them
- in the disruption of international family planning programmes at huge cost to women who are as a result forced to bear large families they cannot support.

The Vatican has declared it believes in a separation of church and state – except where morality is concerned. Where morality is concerned, they will use (observation shows) any method to force their own views on the state and hence on us all. In the draft Concordat with Slovakia they sought to write unchallengeably into Slovak law that rights of conscience could be based exclusively on Vatican doctrine. How hypocritical! What a denial of basic human rights!

But there is a wide range of attitudes among religious believers, many of whom are liberal and in basic agreement with us on social and moral issues such as these: with them we are happy to cooperate and we do so in many ways.

My second introductory note is about our subject today – human rights.

The UN itself is a humanist conception – the idea that men and women can and must sort out their differences by talk and compromise, and that by that route they can create a better world for us all. Many humanists were prominent in its early days –including the first directors of UNESCO, the Food and Agriculture Organisation and World Health Organisation.

Human Rights are basic to Humanism. This was recognised yesterday by the collaboration of the Centre d'Action Laïque here in Belgium, a key member of EHF, with the Le Soir newspaper to produce a special supplement to mark the anniversary of the Universal Declaration.

Why is there this link? It is because this, we believe, is our only life. It is vital therefore to maximise the chance – to empower every individual to make the best of her or his life` according to his/her own ideas of what is best – for who else can properly judge?

Human Rights are fundamentally about the freedom from interference by others – especially Governments – that cannot be fully justified for some legitimate purpose, primarily, protecting the rights of others.

Not only that, but in all Human Rights instruments we are guaranteed freedom of Religion or Belief.

Please do note two things.

1. Freedom is not limited to freedom to believe: it includes freedom to reject belief. Article 9 is (as was stated by the European Court of Human Rights in a 1994 case) not just valuable for the religious but is also “a precious asset for atheists, sceptics and the unconcerned.” – [Kokkinakis v Greece: 17 EHRR 397, para 31]
2. And note that little word ‘or’ – it says “religion or belief”. Belief is differentiated from religion. Of course, beliefs may be religious, but the UDHR, the ECHR do not limit themselves to religious beliefs. Our humanist beliefs are equally protected – our beliefs
  - o in a naturalistic interpretation of the universe
  - o in the natural origins of morality
  - o in the virtues of cooperation and mutual caring
  - o in the right of each of us to determine the meaning she or he will find in life.

These are positive, attractive beliefs that we should acknowledge and make much of: we should not let the religious portray us as negative, lacking a dimension in life, unable to provide meaning beyond consumerism or support morality beyond a fading inheritance from Christianity. Those frequent accusations are libellous and must be rebutted.

We must not just deny that we have a religious faith – we must assert and defend our positive Humanist beliefs and values.

And Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights extends protection from freedom to hold beliefs or reject them to protection from discrimination based on religion or belief, providing us with an immensely powerful legal route to force Governments to respect our rights just as they have to respect those of the religious.

Indeed, we are not talking about two things here – religious beliefs and non-religious beliefs. There is a single spectrum, ranging from the most dogmatic and fundamentalist cults through to the liberal churches and a wide range of semi-religious people more concerned with enquiry than assertion, or with practice and culture rather than belief – people who call themselves religious but without a belief in God – and on to the softer fringes of agnosticism and Humanism and eventually to the hardline atheists who do not acknowledge the legitimacy of asking ‘ultimate questions’ about life and meaning, even in secular terms.

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration. Sadly, however, the foundations of Human Rights are under attack.

In Britain the Archbishop of Canterbury has called for sharia law to be recognised alongside (or perhaps under and within) the civil law of the land – an ill-judged speech that was more concerned with finding a defence for his own church’s anomalous privileges (seats in Parliament and so on) than with advancing Islam.

More importantly, the Holy See last year aligned itself with the Islamists at the annual OSCE human rights meeting in Warsaw, demanding protection for religious beliefs – not religious believers. In effect they were seeking group rights – rights, that is, for the leaders of religious communities to dictate to their members and to deny them their individual Human Rights.

Most importantly, on the international stage, largely unnoticed by the general public, the UN Human Rights Council, like its predecessor the Human Rights Commission, has fallen under the sway of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), with its Cairo Declaration of Islamic Rights that subordinates all rights to Islamic religious duties.

As president of the EHF I have written to President Barroso on this issue, suggesting that the EU consider quitting the Human Rights Council so as to reveal it starkly as a sham and setting up a genuine human rights body in its place. We shall hear more about this sad situation from Keith Porteous Wood later today.

So the 60th anniversary of the Declaration sees Human Rights under siege. It must be a high priority for us to protect Human Rights from their enemies – not just of course the conservative religious lobby (and the liberal religious are our staunch allies in this fight) but also the governmental and other authorities for whom Human Rights are an infringement of their power to rule as they wish regardless of the rights and interests of unfortunate individuals.

**9.30 Human Rights and Freedom of Expression – Moderator: Dan Van Raemdonck**

**Introduction : François Foret**

**Panel : Rob Buitenweg, Edouard Delruelle, Marie Heller**

**Discussion**

**11.00 Coffee**

**11.15 Individual Freedoms – Moderator: Sonia Eggerickx**

**Introduction : Véronique De Keyser**

**Panel : Roger Dehaybe, Jacqueline Herremans**

**Discussion**

**12.45 Lunch**

**14.15 Intervention by Pierre Galand, President of the Centre d'Action La que**

**14.25 Secularism, Politics and Religion – Moderator: Christine Defraigne**

**Introduction : Sophie in't Veld**

**Panel: François Becker, Andrew Copson, Keith Porteous Wood**

**“How the Organisation of the Islamic Conference undermines the UN Human Rights Council**

**Remarks by Keith Porteous Wood at the Colloquium on Secularism and Human Rights, 16 April 2008**

Great anniversaries such as this provide an opportunity to apply the lessons of the past and the present to our plans for the future. And that is what I am inviting you to do now, but it is not going to be a comfortable exercise.

Today, we are honoured to have here as our guests in Brussels some eminent politicians, diplomats and academics. I have no formal background in politics or diplomacy. Indeed I may even be undiplomatic about diplomats! But I hope to give our distinguished guests some food for thought, whether or not they agree with my analysis.

The proposition I start out with and will go on to justify, is that the body overseeing international Human Rights, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Geneva, is ineffective. Worse, it is in grave danger of shielding Human Rights abuses and abusers from public scrutiny. Worse still, it is starting to be used to legitimise – even initiate – attacks on the basic human right of freedom of expression.

Towards the end of last year (2007), I attended the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Geneva on several occasions. I was there as an International Representative of the International Humanist and Ethical Union whose status entitles it to appoint various representatives to the UN, for example at the New York headquarters and Geneva, home to the UNHRC.

It soon became obvious that much of the debate, especially on topics such as freedom of expression, was polarised along religious lines. The dominant voices were coming from the countries that belong to the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC). There are over fifty of them, and on their own form a powerful bloc vote, which is often strengthened by other countries (for example China, Cuba and Russia) for a variety of disparate motives. Up against this, the European states, and others which share their commitment to freedom of expression and other basic human rights seem powerless, certainly in terms of votes. This is largely inbuilt into the structure of the Council and may itself be a symptom of a gradual but hugely significant change in the balance of world power. You will be surprised that the USA does not have a voting role, and to me, the western voices do not speak out with much confidence, if they speak out at all.

The more I heard, the more alarmed I became. It is de rigeur at the UNHRC to talk about Human Rights abuses by Israel, some of which I am the first to say deserve condemnation. However at the same time, it is all but verboten in the UNHRC to refer to sentencing people to death for so-called apostasy or homosexual acts. The handful of countries for which these remain as capital offences are all members of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference.

But today I want to concentrate on the bedrock of democracy and indeed of our civilisation – Freedom of Expression.

It is time for me to substantiate these assertions with some specific examples, which we have to keep updating. Unfortunately they keep being overtaken by something worse. The most blatant to date occurred on 28 March (2008).

A group of OIC states has succeeded in forcing through an amendment to a resolution on the mandate for the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, effectively turning the entire concept on its head. The Rapporteur will now be required to report on the “abuse” of this most cherished freedom. We fear this will be interpreted to include those daring speak out against Sharia laws that require women to be stoned to death for adultery or young men to be hanged for being gay, or against the marriage of girls as young as nine, as in Iran.

The amendment was passed by 27 votes to 15, the OIC states being supported by China, Russia and Cuba.

Canada, India, and a number of European states spoke out against the change of focus from protecting to limiting freedom of expression. More than 20 of the original 53 co-sponsors of the resolution withdrew their support.

The amendment was passed despite a heart-rending plea not to support it by a courageous group of around twenty NGOs, mainly from Islamic states. Following

that, there are now moves to limit NGOs' interventions to only those whose Governments permit them to speak.

The head of steam building up in many Islamic states for worldwide defamation legislation is huge. The Danish cartoon "crisis" which was generated outside Denmark well after the original publication and claimed lives was just an hors d'oeuvres of what can be expected in future. As the world saw towards the end of 2007, agreeing to some children's request to name a teddy bear "Muhammed" can lead to calls for a death sentence.

There is unfortunately insufficient time today to deal with another huge problem, regional and – even more worrying, ideological – variants of the Universal Declaration. Let me just say that there is just one ideological variant, and that is championed by the OIC, called the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam. It is effectively subject to Sharia and is not compatible with the Universal Declaration. Yet I am convinced the aim is to elevate it to the same status, at least in Islamic countries.

Those most desperately in need of Human Rights protection are already those least likely to receive it, and there seem few grounds for optimism about an improvement.

The views I am expressing are shared by my colleague from IHEU, Roy Brown, who deserves much credit for his tireless work in the chamber in Geneva. We have been making this proposition in the public arena for months and no one has yet even tried to suggest we are wrong. I only wish we were. But even if we are only 50% right – this still raises some questions that are very hard to answer. I'll suggest a few.

Bearing in mind that the two year old UNHRC is itself a replacement of a discredited UN Commission, is it capable of ever assuming its rightful role?

Why are so few people aware of the acute – if not chronic – problems with the UNHRC and can human rights be the casualty when diplomats' focus is on keeping the peace and promoting dialogue? Should there not be a recognition that in such matters as Human Rights, compromise is not always possible?

If the UNHRC is found to be unable to fulfil its role, is there a point past which those of like mind would be better to walk away?

If they do this, what is the next best option, and who should take the lead in bringing this about?

Do these problems presage similar difficulties for other international organisations, such as the UN itself, the Council of Europe and even the European Parliament?

And finally, given these problems, what can best be done to promote Universal Human Rights, in the terms of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, worldwide?

I conclude with two pleas to our politicians and diplomats.

On a wider and longer term note, we need a world spotlight on the UNHRC and regular realistic assessments as to whether it continues to serve a useful purpose. If at some time in the future we decide it does not, perhaps the best we can hope for is that a coalition of liberal democracies do their best to promote Human Rights on as broad a front as possible.

On freedom of expression, I urge European leaders to be wary of those affirming their support for freedom of expression, “provided it is used responsibly”. The freedom to say that which is neither challenging nor shocking is no freedom at all. No concessions made on freedom of expression will ever be enough. The daily reality of life in countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia where religion has achieved political power show that many religious movements will be satisfied with nothing less than the silencing of those who disagree with religious dogma.

Our leaders should be much less yielding to demands, including from the Catholic Church, over freedom of expression. No concessions made on freedom of expression will ever be enough. They should realise that new defamation of religion laws will lead to extremists escaping criticism and to the suppression of human rights campaigners and commentators. Freedom of expression underpins our democracy and our civilisation; it is too precious to barter.

*Keith Porteous Wood is the Executive Director of the (UK) National Secular Society.*

## **Discussion**

### **15.45 Human Rights and Secularism – Henri Pena-Ruiz**

### **16.30 Arrival of the President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso**

### **Presentation of conclusions – Michel Vanden Abeele**

### **Introduction – David Pollock:**

### **Colloquium on Secularism and Human Rights, 16 April 2008**

It is my very great privilege and pleasure to welcome President Jose Manuel Barroso to our conference.

Previously Prime Minister of his native Portugal, he is the 11th President of the European Commission and has been much concerned to revive public confidence in the European project. He also, as Sophie in 't Veld reminded us this afternoon, committed his Commission from the start to being champions of human rights.

The EU is indeed highly relevant to our theme of Human Rights. Not only is it committed to the European Convention: it has also introduced its own Charter of Fundamental Rights and has recently set up a Fundamental Rights Agency, with which we are in touch.

It has also agreed a framework directive on employment that outlaws discrimination based on religion or belief – along with race, age, sexuality, disability and gender; and discussions are going on at present about a new directive that may extend to discrimination in other fields than employment – although I gather there is disappointingly a lobby for limiting this new directive to disability alone.

President Barroso has twice – in anticipation of the approval of Article 16C [NB: now Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union] - met the European Humanist Federation – the second time, last July, I was present. He wrote to me only last month that he is “strongly engaged in ensuring the continuation of the frank and productive dialogue with all communities of conviction”, including ourselves.

Indeed, in less than three weeks he, together with the President of the Council of Ministers and the President of the European Parliament, will be meeting the religious leaders of Europe in a repeat of a similar meeting held a year ago. This year they will be talking about climate change and about intercultural dialogue.

Regrettably, we have not yet persuaded the Presidents of the Commission, Council and Parliament that Humanists have equally valid things to say about climate change as bishops and imams and that intercultural dialogue is incomplete without the participation of humanists and secularists. We live in hope.

Nevertheless, we have a friend – albeit a critical friend – in President Barroso, and it gives me much pleasure to invite him to address you.

### **Address by the President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso:**

#### **Human Rights: the Point of Convergence of All the European Heritages**

#### **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I warmly thank the European Humanist Federation for inviting me to bring to a conclusion this European conference on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, organized in partnership with the Centre d'Action Laïque and with the support of the European Commission.

I am pleased to address this forum of the humanist thought. Because we are here to celebrate values dear to Europe and the European project: secularism and human rights. Values that have shaped our way of life and that we want also to shape the world.

We can think of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a great monument of European and universal culture. It is a European speciality to aspire to the universal. The Declaration marks the culmination of a long journey, which was not straight. This journey was the result of convergence and various affiliations. It crosses religious and

humanist cultural heritages, as mentioned in the preamble to the Treaty on European Union, as amended by the Treaty of Lisbon.

There are both continuity and complementarity between the various legacies that gave birth to human rights and the founding principles of the rule of law and, hence, the construction of Europe. There is – I think I can say – no contradiction between the founding principles of the so-called “Western civilization”, which is also, it must be remembered, the cradle of the very idea of secularism.

There is much talk of the famous trio Athens, Rome and Jerusalem. People talk about these three sources – reason, law and morality – as the cornerstones of the great European cultural mosaic. It is a simplistic vision. Why not recognize the Islamic heritage (which acted also as the vehicle to transmit the classical heritage to us) and the influence of Celtic, Germanic and Slavic cultures? Regardless of their personal beliefs, all Europeans are the heirs of this cultural heritage.

The Greco-Roman tradition, the cradle of an ethic that places man at the centre, particularly marked the Renaissance and Enlightenment. I would like to place myself today especially within the great European tradition of the Enlightenment, that of modernity, of freedom of thought. Heritages from several sources played a role in our process of integration fifty years ago. And Europe needs all the lively currents of its great diversity of culture and thought. The motto of the EU, “United in Diversity”, is much more than just a slogan. Diversity is a fundamental issue in European political culture. The values of diversity and acceptance of the idea of diversity are the foundations on which we can build the very idea of unity: a community and a union.

In the diversity of all these currents, philosophical and non-confessional organisations have a place that is as important as it is necessary. They represent the views of an important part of the European population which does not have a religious conception of the world. They are also the bearers of a set of shared values in Europe.

This contribution is essential to building a European identity with which all Europeans can identify. It is necessary for the building of a Europe that is not only political but also ethical. I am convinced that the feeling of belonging to the European Union is inseparable from this ethical dimension. It can only be born through sharing a corpus of values in which human rights occupy a fundamental place.

Cultural diversity, one of the founding principles of the EU, is an integral part of our European identity. The traditions of European thought, just like the diverse models of secularism in Europe, are an expression of it. That is why the principle of separation of political and religious powers, which is very important, even central, in European political history, has taken many different forms within the European Union.

It is a general principle in Europe, where this fundamental pillar of modern rule of law is unchallenged. Its application, however, reflects the history and culture of each country.

Some will say that this is a debate of yesteryear. I do not agree. I have just returned from Turkey where I was impressed by the importance of this debate at this moment.

I can assure you that this is the debate today. Democratic secularism is a major issue in Turkey, along with finding an open version of the concept and a way to implement it.

The EU fully respects diversity and welcomes, in a secular, ideologically neutral framework, the expression of all beliefs which respect human rights and the rule of law.

In holding regular debates on European affairs with leaders of communities of conviction, the Commission has long practised a dialogue that embraces the pluralism of European societies. All associations representing beliefs have a place in this dialogue, which is in the spirit of the participatory democracy envisaged by the Treaty of Lisbon.

A plural political space such as the European Union must remain open to all organizations that can create a sense of belonging through common values and open the way for citizens of member states to accede to the European project. Associations representing beliefs have their place in this. The Commission will continue to encourage them – to encourage you – to enrich an open and pluralistic debate, in view of the prospect of outcomes that embody our values.

I will now try to respond to previous interventions.

In the era of globalization, our societies have an extraordinary cultural diversity and plurality of identities. This must be understood: there is no uniformity of identity in Europe. That is why it is more necessary than ever to promote human rights and fundamental freedoms. Because beyond our differences, we share across cultures one essential thing: respect for human rights.

Those who follow the activities of the European Commission know that I insist often on this point: we must promote our values in the world. This is the *raison d'être* of Europe in a globalized environment. Not just for us, as was the case fifty years ago, when the question was of making a better Europe. Today, it is a question of making a better world.

It is obvious that in a globalized environment, we will have more dialogue, or indeed clashes, of civilizations or cultures. In a world where exchanges are so rapid and so intense, we will increasingly need rules, principles, standards. And who is in a better position to propose – and not to impose, I repeat, but to propose – these rules, these standards, these principles? I think nobody in the world is better placed than Europe to do so. Because thanks to our European integration process, we are the exemplar of reconciliation based on the values of peace. Because we have now managed to unite around the values of peace, freedom and solidarity, 27 very different countries, 27 countries that have very different histories and cultures, but which can now unite around these values. Europe is a laboratory of globalization, the future.

It is on the basis of human rights that we can establish a pragmatic common understanding based on “living together” and not on claims to some notion of absolute truth. For the observance and protection of human rights belong not to the realm of true and false, but that of justice and injustice.

Let me digress a little to talk about my personal experience. Because I have lived under a dictatorship, I have always been afraid of the idea of “ownership” of the truth. That is why I feel very close to the new Member States who see Europe as a project of freedom and openness. Of freedom and solidarity, to be sure. Solidarity among ourselves and with the rest of the world.

This consensus around values shared by the whole of society is essential for social cohesion and development of cohesive societies. It is on this basis that can emerge a collective ethical conscience that puts responsibility before convictions. This is not a matter of agreeing on world views, but of solving problems.

The universality of human rights remains, alas, an unfinished struggle. Even if we can be satisfied with the path we have trod in the past fifty years, we must not give way to complacency. After the Holocaust and all the tragedies that shook Europe, we must, instead, focus on the values to which Europeans are so deeply committed: freedom, human dignity, solidarity and social justice. And why not emphasise the concept of brotherhood, a key dimension for all these schools of thought?

Anyway, there is one non-negotiable value: freedom of expression. We defend that against all countries, great powers or developing countries, just like human rights. They are part of our dialogue with everyone. It comes into everything the Commission does. It led to the creation of the European Agency for Fundamental Rights. Under the guise of subsidiarity, some Member States have disputed adopting an anti-discrimination policy at European level. It is a very important dimension in our actions.

Finally, I wish, in the name of our common values, that we should continue to build a Europe based on all the ideals that have shaped its identity and all those that may still enrich it in future.

Thank you.

*\* NB: President Barroso spoke in French: this is an unofficial translation.*