

## **Symposium 3 I**

### **"international, interculturel et interconvictional"**

### **Social Cohesion in Europe**

The EHF was one of the sponsors of an interesting conference in Strasbourg held on October 4, 2007. Other organisers were Cercle Gaston Crémieux (a liberal jewish association), Ligue internationale de l'enseignement, Manifeste des libertés (a cultural muslim association) and Réseau européen églises de liberté (a Christian association).

It was organised with a number of liberal religious and non religious organisations and it had support from the Council of Europe who provided the conference room, simultaneous translation and several speakers.

The subject was the role and impact of religions and non-religious lifestyles in promoting social cohesion in a multi-cultural Europe. The conference proper was preceded by a public evening meeting that attracted a large audience.

Almost the whole board of EHF attended the conference and several of us contributed to the discussion. The president David Pollock chaired one of the sessions, and three speakers from EHF's member associations were delivering papers.

Topics ranged from philosophy and sociology to reports on very practical work. A full report is to be made available on the Internet.

At the end, Ulrich Bunjes, the deputy director-general of the Council of Europe division dealing with education, culture and related matters, spoke of the 'consensus on a European laïcité' that underpins the Council's work in this area and which was not implemented everywhere but represented the European consensus. It has three principles: freedom of thought, conscience and religion; the equal rights and duties of all citizens regardless of religion or belief; and the 'relative autonomy' of religious communities and the state, which he explained as minimal or no interference by the state in the affairs of religious communities and minimal or no influence of religious communities on the state. He talked of values-based intercultural dialogue, stressing it was concerned with listening and understanding, not with compromising or jeopardising one's own values. There was no question of compromising human rights on cultural grounds.

These principles would inform the white paper on 'inter-cultural dialogue' that the Council of Europe is to publish in December. The Council will also hold a conference next April on the subject.

Humanists are represented at the Council of Europe by the IHEU, but liaison with the EHF is close - one of IHEU's representatives is our general secretary, Georges Liénard

Philippe Lazar, past president of cercle Gaston Crémieux, concluded the meeting in defining four possibilities for the future.

By the way, is it true in other countries as it is in the UK that the meaning in practice of words like 'intercultural' and 'multicultural' has been narrowed down in recent years to something like 'interfaith' and 'multifaith'? There's a lot more to culture than religion!

DP and GL, October 2007