

High Level Meeting with EC VP Frans Timmermans and Philosophical Organisations

2nd June 2015

By the European Humanist Federation

- *What are central issues of disagreement in today's society and possible areas of compromise? What is your experience in accommodating the needs of others and building a "community of communities" rather than a "community of strangers"?*

Secularism should be regarded as a central issue. It is the best guarantee for neutral and impartial institutions that can accommodate everyone, regardless of religion and beliefs. Central issues of disagreement focus on equality issues (same-sex wedding), sexual and reproductive health and rights (access to abortion), ethical issues (euthanasia, research on human embryonic stem cells) and the neutrality of the State (crucifixes in public schools classes). The common point between these issues is that religious groups want to impose their vision on everybody else and this is not acceptable: nobody is forced to have an abortion, to marry with a person of the same sex or to resort to euthanasia. Giving rights to people does not harm others.

Only secularism ensures a community of communities that give space to all the religious and non-religious people alike while ensuring a common base of rules. Secularism requires that civil society finds a common ethic, acceptable to all its members. Especially in multi-religious societies, the State has to remain neutral towards religion in order to not discriminate anyone and ensure a better living together of people despite their differences. It helps build a community of communities, where everyone's belief is accepted and can express itself. The right to practice one's religion is not absolute but can be used within legal borders aiming at protecting others and ensuring their fundamental rights.

- *What are the main gaps and obstacles (legislative, political, administrative, or financial) to fill at national and local level to counter discrimination based on religion, belief and/or ethnic origin in practice? How can such gaps be tackled at EU level?*

At the national level, there are plenty of obstacles which undermine equality and which reinforce discriminations. Religious exemptions in anti-discrimination directives are one of the problems since they are often used as a tool to discriminate against other faiths and LGBTI people and generally against any other attitude, life-stance that do not fit into the rules of the concerned religious community.

Anti-discrimination policy is also of direct competence of the EU. In 2008, the European Commission proposed the "horizontal" anti-discrimination directive which aims at tackling multiple discriminations outside employment and aligning the EU with its international commitments. As you are well aware, this directive is still blocked at the Council because of strong opposition coming from several countries (Germany first). We are very pleased that the successive rotating presidencies have made efforts to reach a compromise at the

Council. However, we would like to know which strategy the Commission has planned to ensure the adoption of this directive in the coming months?

Furthermore, if we value the work of the EU Fundamental Rights Agency, we regret that it only remains an advisory body entitled to work on thematic issues and not allowed to conduct reviews for each EU country. The EU should definitively adopt a strong rule of law mechanism (like the Copenhagen mechanism for candidate countries) in order to review the protection of human rights and the application of anti-discrimination directives in each EU country. The FRA could be the body undertaking this work but we could also think of another independent committee. We can't accept mere dialogues anymore. Europe needs to speak out against and sanction its Member States which drift from democratic rules (ex of Hungary with Jobbik militia terrorizing Roma and migrants communities and of Greece with Golden Dawn terrorizing transgender and migrants). History and actuality have shown that we need Europe to strongly act to protect its values.

- *What role could non-confessional organisations and community leaders play in proposing narratives which are inclusive, based on common values and mutual understanding?*

Non-confessional organisations and community leaders' voices are important. But too often, their voices are more dividing than inclusive. Too often also, religious hierarchies are too disconnected from their own basis. It is very clear for Christian people who majoritarily hold open views on issues like contraception, divorce, abortion, euthanasia and gay marriage whereas churches mostly hold very conservative views on these issues. Religious hierarchies must question their own teachings and reconnect with their basis (and not impose their own views through more evangelization like the Catholic Church proposed after the Synod on the Family).

Religious leaders must also strongly discourage the use of violence where it exists and encourage respect between different communities. It is also the role of non-confessional organisations which are often wrongly said to be anti-religions and anti-religious. As secularists and humanists, we deeply value freedom to believe and not-believe and we understand that disagreements on societal issues can exist. However, we can not accept that some organisations and groups try to impose their own views on all citizens regardless their beliefs. We will always democratically combat this work to ensure that everyone is free to choose about one's own life. If this message is not clear to everyone, we will work to make our views better understood.

- *Which are the most effective practices that have a demonstrably positive impact and potential for replication, in particular at local level and amongst and by young people?*

Programmes that involve young people in local issues should be encouraged: it may concern environmental issues, sports grounds, cultural exchanges, etc. Religion should not be taught in public schools but young people can be taught *about* religions *and* belief systems. Exchanges between schools, families or countries should also be encouraged.

More generally, it is important to connect schools with their social and cultural environment as they do not exist in a vacuum. Schools should be open to external actors who can contribute to bringing important issues around citizenship and living together, as long as school teachers prepare the students (background information, tools to grasp a situation and develop critical thinking) and supervise these external actors.

- *Which responsibilities come with the right to freedom of expression? Where are the limits between freedom of speech and incitement to hatred?*

Religions do not hold rights, people do. One should be free to criticize religion, just like any idea or belief system. There is a fundamental difference between criticizing a religion or belief and targeting people as such – to say “I think the Bible, the Torah or the Quran are full of non-sense” is different than “I think all Christians, Jews or Muslims are mentally ill and should be treated accordingly”.

EHF and IHEU have launched a campaign: “End blasphemy laws”. There are blasphemy laws in many Member States: Ireland, Germany, Austria, Poland, Italy, Malta, Greece, etc. In its 2013 Guidelines on Freedom of Religion and Beliefs, the EU takes a clear stand in favour of freedom of expression and against blasphemy laws. Now it is time to abolish all blasphemy laws in Europe, as recommended by the Council of Europe.

- *Which further initiatives could Member States, EU institutions and international organisations take in order to promote common values and mutual understanding and counter stereotypes in the educational sphere? What are already existing best practices in this respect?*

There are a number of initiatives trying to prepare teachers and the educational system more generally to countering different kinds of stereotypes. Some European countries have added the fight against stereotypes (especially against gendered stereotypes) in their national education program. We would like the EU institutions to encourage such programs and to broaden them to other kinds of discrimination.

In Belgium for instance, the government launched an important program against homophobia. In this framework, teachers who were willing to, have opened their classroom to LGBTI youth associations to talk about homophobia and the discrimination young gay and lesbian meet on a daily basis. This programme (GrlS) started in Canada and spread to Belgium 2 years ago with concrete successes. It has had a real impact on the way young people perceive gay, lesbian and bisexual people and it has increased their awareness on the difficulties other young people can face. This kind of programme could be extended to other minorities which also have to face discriminations.

The EU is also financing some “Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices projects” through the Key Action 2. The EHF association in Germany is using this funding to prepare young teachers to the challenges they might face regarding identity or migration. Teachers get a chance to exchange their practices on how to deal with such questions and teach the children about stereotypes and about other cultures.

- *In the end, will we have "to agree to disagree" or is there more to it? How could the society adjust to increasing diversity? What is the society at large ready to accommodate for a better "living together"?*

In a diverse society, it is normal to have several opinions contradicting each other and to have disagreements. In fact, humanism sees critical thinking as an important part of humanism and this can only happen when questioning and sometimes opposing what we are used to. It is how science progresses and it has played an important role in the development of our societies.

However we believe that shared democratic principles and standards that are enshrined in Human Rights and in the rule of law need to be applied by all and to all in order to ensure

a better living together. Fundamental rights are not a question of cultural differences but are universal since they aim to protect to dignity, the integrity and the well-being of every person. These principles need to be the principles on which we build a diverse society. Diversity is enrichment to our societies. It needs however to happen within the framework of common and shared principles we can all agree on (Charter of Fundamental rights, European Convention on Human Rights etc).

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Comment les représentants des cultes et organisations convictionnelles appréhendent-ils dans l'exercice de ceux-ci l'espace de valeurs communes qui est celui de la citoyenneté partagée ?

**Colloque Laïcité de l'État et Citoyenneté partagée
ICHEC, le 25 avril 2015**

Jean De Brueker, Secrétaire général du CAL et membre du CA de la FHE

Si la citoyenneté implique, par essence, par nature, par étymologie, la participation à la vie de la Cité ; la citoyenneté non partagée tient de la démarche contemplative, de la retraite monacale, de l'effacement social.

Nous sommes, dans ce cas, à des années-lumière de ce vivre ensemble exhorté par tous, idéalisé par beaucoup et source d'interprétations diverses.

En effet, ce fameux « vivre ensemble » peut être une simple juxtaposition nimbée de tolérance bienveillante ou se pervertir en confrontations communautaires sur la base de replis identitaires ou encore s'épanouir dans le « construire ensemble » impliquant la connaissance de l'autre, l'intérêt pour l'autre, le respect de l'autre et le débat des idées.

Il faut donc échanger, dialoguer, confronter, et là, la dimension des convictions (religieuses ou non religieuses) est un élément fondamental de ce dialogue interculturel, interculturel, pour favoriser le vivre ensemble, mais il convient de prendre la juste mesure de cette dimension.

Il faut garder en ligne de mire l'interprétation, l'esprit critique, la confrontation des diversités et, surtout, la mise en évidence des convergences qui permettent une citoyenneté partagée et épanouissante, respectueuse de cette diversité.

Il faut dégager un consensus autour des valeurs partagées par l'ensemble de la société. C'est sur ce socle que peut émerger une conscience éthique, collective qui place la responsabilité avant la conviction. Il ne s'agit pas de s'accorder sur les visions du monde, mais sur la résolution des problèmes.

Pour se comprendre, pour dialoguer, il faut partager un bagage commun minimum, savoir d'où on parle, avec qui on communique, quel est l'effet produit par notre expression, quelle est la grille de lecture de notre interlocuteur.

Au départ de ce bagage commun, on peut se rassembler sur des valeurs communes qui sont la protection des droits fondamentaux, la démocratie, l'acceptation des différences et la vision d'un futur commun, pour faire de la diversité une richesse et non une cause d'exclusion.

La gestion démocratique d'une diversité culturelle grandissante en Europe, ancrée dans l'histoire de notre continent et amplifiée par la mondialisation, est devenue, depuis quelques années, une priorité.

Comment répondre à cette diversité ?

Quelle est notre vision de la société des humains ?

S'agit-il d'une société où les individus vivent dans des communautés séparées, caractérisées au mieux par la coexistence de majorités et de minorités, aux droits différenciés, vaguement reliées entre elles sur base d'ignorance mutuelle et stéréotypée ?

Ou, au contraire, nous représentons-nous une société dynamique et ouverte, exempte de toute discrimination et profitable à tous, qui privilégiera l'intégration de tous les individus dans le plein respect de leurs droits fondamentaux ?

Dans cette perspective, le dialogue interculturel a un rôle fondamental pour prévenir les clivages ethniques, religieux, linguistiques et culturels, et permet de progresser ensemble en reconnaissant les différentes identités de manière positive et démocratique, sur la base de valeurs universelles partagées et là on se réfère aux droits de l'Homme.

Les droits de l'Homme ne sont pas une vérité transcendante et révélée, mais une construction humaine, et donc imparfaite, qui constitue une référence pour toutes les femmes et tous les hommes soucieux de construire un espace commun de vivre ensemble et qui assure à toutes et tous un égal respect en dignité et en droits.

La Déclaration Universelle des droits de l'Homme est susceptible d'évolution, elle peut être critiquée, mais elle n'en demeure pas moins un merveilleux outil, un socle de référence pour tous les défenseurs de la liberté, de l'égalité et de la démarche démocratique.

Propositions :

1. Favoriser, au sein des différents systèmes éducatifs, l'apprentissage et la connaissance pour tous les faits religieux, l'histoire des religions, le questionnement philosophique et la démarche citoyenne.
2. Demander avec fermeté aux autorités religieuses, convictionnelles, qu'elles prennent position avec force et clarté pour dénoncer les dérives commises en leur sein, en leur nom.

3. Inciter les États à développer et à appliquer l'arsenal juridique qui permet le respect des libertés collectives et individuelles.
4. Que dans leurs sphères culturo-convictionnelles spécifiques, les autorités interpellent les représentants des pays qui ne garantissent pas le respect des libertés, de la liberté.
5. Favoriser l'universalité des droits pour éviter que le droit à la différence n'aboutisse à la différence des droits.