

EDUCATION ABOUT RELIGIONS BUT NOT RELIGIOUS INDOCTRINATION

Intervention by Hans Christian Cars on behalf of the European Humanist Federation

Humanists believe strongly in **democracy, human rights** and the **rule of law** and this belief is conducive to the following considerations by EHF with regard to Session II: Education and Religion or Belief . EHF comprises more than forty humanist organisations in about twenty European countries.

EHF fully agrees with the OSCE statement according to which “Teaching is one of the most sensitive areas in the sphere of freedom of religion or belief for those concerned about the transmission of values to the next generations”. We take the word “values” as meaning – in this specific approach – values referred to FoRB considered not *per se* but in the context of an open society governed by the rule of law.

In such a society, whose principles are accepted by all OSCE member states, school children should learn both about religious and non-religious beliefs such as humanism and be taught by teachers who are not preachers but able to provide a balanced, objective and non-confessional education on such matters. EHF has welcomed the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* as they offer the right guidance on the preparation of curricula for teaching about religions and beliefs, as well as preferred procedures for assuring fairness in the development of curricula, and standards for how they could be implemented.

In public schools in many member states such education is provided already. However, in other states this is not the case, sometimes because these states are restricted by accords concluded in the form of concordats or agreements with a church or with the Holy See, an OSCE member state which is “the Holy Father and the Curia”, i.e. not quite a state but most certainly a church. We believe that these agreements should be abrogated in favour of a non-confessional school education about different religions, humanism and other life stances.

The teaching of a single religion in state schools stems from a totally unacceptable interference from the side of an organized religion in the area of education, because the teaching of religious faith to small children as well as to teen-agers is not education. It is indoctrination and not an example of what freedom of religion for all citizens alike should be. Actually, it is the opposite: it is the freedom for a religion – Islam, Christianity, in fact usually the Catholic church - and its political allies to enforce a religious doctrine and this runs counter the principle of separation of church and state, a tenet of our democracies.

We disagree that religions are the only source of morals and that that ethical values, as interpreted by church leaders, are of divine origin. We believe that it is inherent in human nature to have moral values. The vast majority of all men and women wish to help each other

and be good to each other. They do not need religious carrots and sticks in form of prospective heavenly rewards and punishments in order to behave ethically.

This is what children should be taught in schools together with the constant exercise of reason and the awareness of the primary role of science in enriching our universal knowledge and understanding of the origins and workings of the universe for the betterment of human society. We form our life-stance on the basis of such knowledge and this helps us understand the value of justice, of legality and of equal rights of all human beings in the family, in politics, and in public life.

Human beings create meaning and purpose for themselves by adopting worthwhile goals and endeavouring to live their lives to the full. But much too often this endeavour is thwarted by a society which accepts the privileges of some and ensuing discrimination against others. All too often this starts at school where shamefully children learn that discrimination against non-believers is acceptable and normal.