



OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting 2007
30 September 2007

Report by David Pollock – EHF President

The EHF was again at the OSCE Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) annual Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM) in Warsaw for the relevant days (September 24-26). Our delegates were Vera Pegna (our hardworking OSCE representative) and me. We were accompanied by Hanne Stinson, representing the British Humanist Association.

This meeting brings together governments, the Council of Europe and NGOs, with the latter generally complaining about abuses by governments, who protest their innocence. The NGOs range from respected organisations such as Amnesty to bizarre ones like the Raelians (“My name is Princess Luna and I believe that human scientists from another planet created all life on earth using DNA”) or the Moonies (now calling themselves the Universal Peace Federation). However bizarre, they still have genuine human rights abuses to report.

Some governments (especially the USA) complain about abuses in other countries (especially in eastern Europe), and the Council of Europe and some other bodies produce principled statements of best practice and considered reports. Interventions in plenary sessions are limited to four or five minutes at most and speakers are called in the order they put their names down to speak. All contributions are placed on the OSCE website if speakers provide them for uploading.

If anything, this year was even more successful than last. We intervened in all four relevant sessions. In the first session I [warned against](#) political Islam and against the pusillanimous reaction of many western liberals to its demands, including immunity from “defamation”. This provoked a rebuke in the next session from the rapporteur for Islamophobia (1) who in a departure from his prepared text warned that “confusing criticism and defamation is an error – they are quite different things”; and the Holy See delegate (2), among others, also demanded protection for religion: “mocking and undermining Christianity is against religious freedom – a subversive attempt to undermine freedom and tolerance”.

I therefore changed my [next intervention](#) (on church privileges in European states) to warn against such demands: “Human rights belong to individuals, not to institutions or religions, and attempts to extend human rights to religion itself and to religious

institutions are a false and dangerous development that is to be resisted.”. These interventions brought private congratulations from several delegates, including from some governmental delegates and several ODIHR staff.

In the third session, Vera Pegna [spoke](#) about the abuse non-believers suffer at the hands of the religious, quoting examples and recommending that OSCE “should devote particular attention to the discourse of religious leaders” as well as others already designated. In the final relevant session Vera [spoke again](#) on the theme that human rights belong to individuals, not to churches or religions.

In the third session Hanne Stinson also [spoke](#) of the need “to include the non-religious in all their interfaith and multifaith dialogue and activities, and to use the inclusive language of the European Convention on Human Rights, i.e. ‘religion or belief’ (where ‘belief’ includes Humanism, atheism and all non-religious beliefs or lifestyles), not ‘religion’ or ‘faith’.” In the fourth session, Hanne Stinson [spoke](#) of her experience as an advisor to the UK Government on the creation of their new Commission on Equality and Human Rights, where she and a Muslim were the only representatives of religion and belief. She described how they had created a Religion and Belief Consultative Group to ensure that they were well informed of the views of other interested parties and that all were kept informed of developments. The group had succeeded and might now take on an independent life.

We also held a successful side meeting on similar themes which was attended by about 20 people including a USA representative and three ODIHR staff. As president I delivered an address that can be read [here](#). Earlier, we attended a meeting on so-called Christianophobia and more or less took it over since those present wanted to debate with us.

Hanne and I also attended and spoke several times in discussion at the side meeting at which the forthcoming OSCE Toledo Guidelines on Teaching of Religion and Belief were introduced.

Outside the meetings, we lobbied national delegates and made friends with NGO delegates, finding much agreement and sympathy with our views.

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FOOTNOTES

1. This was Omur Orhun, whose [official text](#) (from which he departed in the session) includes:-

“a. It should be recognized that religious defamation and for that matter intolerance and discrimination against Muslims is an affront to human dignity.

“b. It should also be recognized that Islamophobia is exceptional among the political ills of the present era: Frequently it is not only the Muslims who are attacked, but also their faith.”

2. This was Monsignor Anthony R. Frontiero, whose [prepared text](#) includes:

“These episodes of religious violence highlight the underlying tension in the OSCE region around religious freedom. They also are evidence of a certain discrimination and intolerance against Christianity, and in some cases a vilification of Christianity; whereby the freedom of speech so readily granted to other groups is being abolished in the case of Christians, and the right to interpret the sacred texts of the Bible regarding certain issues is being stripped away, because some feel the Christian teaching on these matters is just too “offensive.” Demonizing Christianity, or deliberately mocking and undermining central tenets of the Christian faith as a means to promoting the rights of other groups is a clear and flagrant contradiction to the religious freedom and mutual respect that all people should enjoy, not to mention to the work of building a more just and peaceful community. Such practices and must be seen for what they are: a subversive attempt to dismantle the progress made thus far in the promotion of tolerance and non-discrimination.”