

OSCE special meeting on freedom of religion and belief 2009

10 July 2009

The OSCE held a special conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief in Vienna on 9-10 July 2009. This was in part a result of EHF's representations. Our representative at this Special Human Dimension Implementation Meeting was Vera Pegna, our permanent representative with OSCE. Also attending were Andrew Copson, EHF Board Member, representing the British Humanist Association, and Catherine Lützeler of the Centre d'Action Laïque, Belgium.

This is Vera Pegna's report on the event:

You may recall that in October 2007, in an official letter to Ambassador Strohal, director of ODIHR/OSCE, EHF asked that a Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting be devoted to FoRB [Freedom of Religion or Belief]. It took place in Vienna on 9 and 10 July.

The meeting started with a [side-event for Civil Society](#) organised by ODIHR. I was asked to deliver one of the [introductory speeches](#) and was told that this was the first time ever that OSCE had asked a humanist and non-believer (member of an atheist organisation: UAAR) to open a meeting, albeit a side-event. Ahead of the meeting ODIHR published a call for recommendations from Civil Society organisations. [Five EHF members filed recommendations and the EHF itself filed three recommendations](#) – which was a good show as against the 5 religiously-connected NGOs which submitted theirs.

During the lunch break before the plenary session [EHF held its own side-event](#) on “Secularism and the Rule of Law are a guarantee for FoRB”. [I opened the meeting](#) with a few words on EHF - what it is and what it does – and made a few comments:

- Rights belong to human beings. Are the attempts at applying them also to religions and beliefs and to religious institutions and communities of faith and conviction justified?
- Can a state that is not secular genuinely guarantee Freedom of Religion or Belief? Can it offer equality and non-discrimination?

Eighteen people attended, among them the delegations of the EU, Slovakia, Italy, France, the Netherlands and COMECE (the European Roman Catholic Bishops'

conference). The discussion was quite lively but had to be interrupted because the plenary session was about to start.

There were three general sessions. All 56 OSCE member states were present as well as 85 NGOs. Of these around 40 were in some way connected to a religion and three to humanism: BHA, CAL and EHF. In the participants' list COMECE appeared under International Organisations (the Catholic church does not want to be considered an NGO) and EHF under NGOs, but since EHF is as international as COMECE, next time we shall be careful to ask for equal treatment.

I intervened at the three general sessions, Andrew Copson (BHA) at two and Catherine Lutzeler (CAL) at one. At the first session I deplored the Irish defamation bill that had just been enacted and the Irish delegation replied that this law was better than the previous one because at least it did not mention imprisonment as a possible punishment for defaming religion! I spoke of concordats and the Holy See representative replied that we should not mention concordats any more but "international treaties" and that these were necessary for the activity of the Catholic church but entailed no privileges! Both these replies show we are listened to and considered worth replying, which is important given that the meeting was literally submerged by religiously committed speakers and discussants. At the third session I spoke briefly on the need to cater for secular funerals and burials.

Apart from us, at least one speaker and several NGOs upheld the rule of law and so did the ODIHR director. However, two claims emerged clearly from religiously-oriented speakers and organisations:

- that defamation of religion should be punished by law and
- that conscientious objection on religious grounds should automatically become legal.

This is the policy pursued by the Vatican, sometimes as at the UN with infamous allies such as the OIC (Organisation of the Islamic Conference), and rigorously applied in Italy. Recently when the Pope went on holiday to the Alps, a RAI (public TV) journalist said: "there will hardly be a soul that will have the courage and patience to listen to him" (i soliti quattro gatti che avranno la pazienza e il coraggio di ascoltarlo). A formal reprimand was sent by RAI to the journalist who then wrote a letter of apology – but he was removed from his post as a Vatican expert and assigned elsewhere.

Andrew Copson adds:

I spoke a number of times. Speaking to the EHF recommendation on education I drew attention to the need for national policies to make use of the [Toledo Guiding](#)

Principles in developing their teaching about religions and beliefs and the need for the OSCE to be more active on this front, for example with the Council of Europe. I made use of the example of the UK, which had not taken sufficient notice of the principles (and especially of their inclusion of non-religious beliefs) in recent revision of national guidance for England on 'Religious Education'.

I also spoke to the recommendation of the British Humanist Association on discrimination and equality laws. Arguing against the claims by many Christian groups present at the Conference that equality law discriminated against them, I said that on the contrary religious groups were still allowed to perpetrate too much discrimination against others. The guidelines for the review of national legislation on religion or belief produced by the OSCE were not being observed by many states when it came to giving equal protection for the non-religious. I used in particular the example of the UK granting wide licence to discriminate to religious organisations through exemptions from UK equality laws.