

EHF Submission on Proposed EU Year of Intercultural Dialogue

26 October 2006

This submission of 26 October 2006 was in response to a consultation paper from the EU Commission. In the event funding arrangements for the Year were such that it was impossible for EHF to take part.

The European Humanist Federation (EHF) wishes to propose a European-scale initiative that could contribute towards promoting intercultural dialogue.

The initiative is characterised by its humanistic methodology. The overall aim of the proposal is to involve as many people as possible so as to produce a truly intercultural dialogue.

The EHF's standpoint is based on the promotion of a humanist society in Europe in the sense of a society of tolerance and mutual understanding. A humanist society promotes the building of bridges between different beliefs, religions and political forces. Humanism is committed to the open society, the essence of which is that it accommodates a wide range of beliefs and life styles while insisting on and defending the civic virtues of democracy.

This implies the negotiation of differences and the art of compromise as the best method for achieving social consensus. Humanism is a lifstance (or world-view) in its own right but seeks no privileges for itself and opposes privileging of any other religion or belief: it can thus be considered as a catalyst for peaceful and constructive living together.

It is on this basis that we attempt to answer the Commission's rather general questions concerning the proposed Year of Intercultural Dialogue in 2008.

A- How can one contribute towards identifying, evaluating, developing and exchanging projects, experience and good practice in intercultural dialogue on a European scale?

People's day-to-day life consists of a range of social practices, each of them having a set of rules and rituals, often based on beliefs and assumptions that may be more or less widely shared in society. These social practices and mental attitudes and beliefs go to form a specific culture. In other words, culture is a base for our social actions. This is a broad, basic view on culture.

Cultural exclusion

Parts – but parts only – of this everyday culture are documented in socially recognised cultural objects, expressions or manifestations (films, books, newspapers, scientific articles, myths, stories, weblogs, oral traditions, music, art etc.), which are in a way enduring and hold out a mirror to us.

Many institutions and cultural mediators play a role in this (schools, museums, media, NGOs, religious and other life-supporting organisations, universities, writers, artists, singers, government, international institutions etc.). Each of these mediators, often unconsciously, selectively focuses on a certain segment of the population (large or small). Their products are fragmentary. The mirror that's held out to us doesn't reflect everybody and often fulfils, consciously or unconsciously, a narcissistic function, i.e. the mirror presents us with our own "beauty".

And in this lie the roots of inequality, exclusion, power, discrimination, contempt.

Cultural inclusion

It is one thing to draft anti-discrimination laws and the like to minimise these negative by-products of our cultures: this the European Union attempts in an admirable way. It is another thing entirely to give concrete effect to these rules and laws. That is where a true intercultural dialogue comes into the picture. Such a dialogue starts from an uninhibited, open, free and critical point of view, which in its essence is a humanistic point of view.

To make real intercultural dialogue possible the walls created by enduring and distorting frameworks of thought and habit have to be broken down. The only way to do that is by free inquiry.

Free inquiry is the only acceptable method to find answers to the real-life questions that people ask themselves concerning the meaning of existence, society, environment, nature, and the universe.

It rejects all imposed authority, all so-called revealed truths and dogmas in whatever domain, along with the restraints, indoctrination, and oppression such authority places on the free development of people and society. This methodology results in an open (but not empty) mind, a necessary condition to establish such a "true" dialogue.

B- What information and communication initiatives could contribute towards involving all European Union residents, and particularly young people, in the promotion of intercultural dialogue in day to day life (e.g. schools and other places of education, sporting and cultural activities, the workplace, etc.) and familiarising them with it?

We suggest that the particular relevance of intercultural dialogue to the European Union is its contribution to building an idea of a common European citizenship. The idea of citizenship depends on shared assumptions about the society of which one is a citizen. These include ideas about equality and non-discrimination, relations between family members, the role of the state (for example, how far does it intrude into personal life with laws about personal conduct based on moral notions rather than considerations of public order), how to handle extremist minorities that reject the fundamental requirements for living in society and the place of institutions

representing major social groups in the governance of society. It is these particular aspects with which our proposal is concerned.

The current discussions in many countries about the wearing of the veil and other religiously significant garments by Muslim women form part of wider concerns about integration of religious minorities defined largely by immigration and therefore divided from the mainstream not only by religion but also to a large extent by ethnicity and general culture.

These are of the wider debate about the sort of society in which we wish to live. Similar questions arise from the reactions (sometimes defensive, sometimes more welcoming) of traditional religious and nationalist groups to the moves (sometimes tentative, sometimes aggressive) of these newly emerging religious/ethnic minorities to assert their identities.

The ways these conflicts are resolved will determine for good or ill much of the future shape of European society. The 2008 Year of Intercultural Dialogue can contribute towards benign resolutions.

The methodology of free inquiry can be applied to these vexed social questions. The first necessity is to understand the points of view and perceptions of other groups in society. Encounters between members of different groups for the sake of dialogue and mutual understanding are of obvious importance. Though it has to be admitted that only the more liberal minded from any group are likely to participate, they can then be expected to have an influence on other members of their groups.

The next step is for these dialogues to address the question 'how best can society be organised so that such heterogeneous groups of people can live peacefully and productively together?' The immediate answers from different groups will assert their own interests with defences of privilege and demands for respect and for new rights. Well-organised dialogues aided by goodwill can move beyond this stage, however, to recognition of the need to live together under common laws and norms and to an investigation of how those laws and norms should be framed. At this stage one would expect the starting point to be individual human rights (as enshrined in the European Declaration of Human Rights and in other such instruments) and the end-point (if agreement is in fact reached) to be realisation that equality of rights and harmonious living together demands a society based on giving no group a privileged position and (in public affairs) on sharing of assumptions, vocabulary and institutions.

One of the most important factors is to select a cross-section of participants that avoids homogeneous groups with, if not closed minds, then minds uninformed of the attitudes and perceptions of others. What is necessary is to break out of the confinement of racial, political, religious and other norms, to go beyond the religious and philosophical divisions that, most of the time, will not allow us to question the history, heritage and attitudes of our particular ways of life. In other words, we need to step outside the 'comfort zone' of our usual restricted identities.

Pluralist discussion of this kind can critically dismantle fundamentalist and exclusive messages.

At its most recent Board meeting the European Humanist Federation decided in principle to participate in the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008 and to bring it to the attention of its member associations. Most of our member associations are active in their own countries in some form of intercultural dialogue, even if the name “intercultural” is not always being used. More often, inter-lifescence dialogue (or interfaith dialogue – although humanists do not regard Humanism as a ‘faith’!), working for social cohesion, integrative education or non-discrimination, are the terms used to define their approaches, depending on the particular situation. All these approaches have the common goal of developing a better understanding of each other without any kind of proselytism.

As an example, a colloquium will be organised this year by one of our Belgian member organisations on the theme of “Making Sense in the City”, not to deliver a message but with the objective of focussing on the impact of global urbanisation on those cultural, religious and other ways which generally give human beings meaning and direction in their lives. Many other projects are undertaken by member associations and youth organisations, often in partnership with other groups, on a regional or national scale.

C- What specific European scale initiatives likely to reach, directly or indirectly, as many people in the European Union as possible – and particularly young people – could contribute towards promoting intercultural dialogue?

We are therefore suggesting that the 2008 Year of Intercultural Dialogue should be focused on the promotion of activities in member States meeting the criteria set out above. As many projects as possible should be organised in as many member states as possible, on a local, regional or national level, with people belonging to different cultural, religious and/or ethnic groups. The aim would be not just to benefit from the constructive outcome of such dialogues within the Year but also to stimulate the continuation of this kind of dialogue in day-to-day life in as many countries as possible.

Key principles in projects of this kind are that people feel competent and responsible to participate with others as active citizens, taking responsibility for making (albeit hypothetical) choices on significant issues.

In concluding we would add a practical note. The main problems in organising events on a European scale are:

- The need to obtain a large enough budget (travel expenses and accommodation both in the preparatory phase and during the events, interpretation during the meetings, etc.)
- The need to have funding confirmed sufficiently in advance.

Usually budget decisions emerge from the EU commission very late – even after the beginning of projects – with the result that projects are ill-prepared or even abandoned.

We hope that such crippling disadvantages will not affect the projects for the Year of Intercultural Dialogue.