

Meeting with President Barroso

5 July 2007



[L-R] GEORGES LIÉNARD, PIERRE GALAND, JULIEN HOUBEN, DAVID POLLOCK, PRESIDENT BARROSO, SONJA EGGERICKX, ROB BUITENWEG



EHF PRESIDENT DAVID POLLOCK WITH PRESIDENT BARROSO

An EHF delegation met the President Barroso at his invitation on July 5, 2007. This was EHF's second meeting with the President. EHF president David Pollock, vice-presidents Rob Buitenweg and Julien Houben and General Secretary Georges Liénard, accompanied by Pierre Galand, president of the Centre d'Action Laïque, and Sonja Eggerickx, president of the Unie Vrijzinnige Verenigingen (and of IHEU), went to the Berlaymont building in Brussels to meet the EU's chief official.

David Pollock said that the EHF represented those people of Europe who had no religion – who were not far short of half the population of the EU. The EHF favoured separation of religion and politics: at the minimum the state should be neutral on religion and belief. The EHF had no wish to interfere with the freedom of religious people, but warned that criticism of unjustified religious privileges was often seen by the churches as religious intolerance. In our view anyone who defended such privileges was in fact defending discrimination against everyone who had different beliefs.

David Pollock noted our objections to the special arrangements for consultation with the churches and bodies such as ourselves, but said that since such consultations were now established, the EHF wished to participate fully in dialogues such as the EU had with religious leaders. For example, he had asked in advance that EHF be invited to the meeting on May 15 when the three Presidents of the EU Council, Commission and Parliament had met a range of Christian, Jewish and Muslim religious leaders, but this had not been agreed.

President Barroso interrupted to express his surprise that the EHF should wish to be included in such meetings: 'after all, you do not have a religion', he said. In reply,

the EHF delegates explained that humanism, like religion, provided answers to so-called 'ultimate questions' and a basis for morality. The EHF therefore had its own views on the matters discussed at meetings such as that on May 15, which (to quote the subsequent press release) included 'freedom of belief . . . democracy, the rule of law, tolerance, justice, solidarity and human dignity'.

We pressed this point for some time while President Barroso continued to maintain that it would not be productive for humanists to attend the same meetings.

We raised our concerns about abuses of human rights in Poland as reported by humanists there, and as they had asked we suggested that the EU should threaten suspension of Poland's membership if matters did not improve. Civil liberties were under severe threat – those of the LGBT community and of many other minorities. We told him that our humanist colleagues there were having increasing difficulty in meeting as universities and other institutions were intimidated into refusing to allow them to hire rooms.

President Barroso said he took our concerns, which others also had raised, very seriously. He had raised the subject already with the Polish prime minister. Mr Barroso pointed out that cases could be taken to the European Court of Human Rights.

We also asked President Barroso to look into a detail concerning the appointment of teachers in the special EU Commission schools: pupils could opt for religious education or a course in non-religious ethics, but whereas the churches appointed teachers for the former, the humanist organisations were not involved in appointing teachers for the ethics courses.

Finally, EHF delegation presented President Barroso with a copy of The European Dream, the booklet published by EHF to mark the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome.

The President thanked us, saying he welcomed the EHF's commitment to dialogue and said he wished to continue the relationship with EHF.