

Protest at exclusion of non-religious beliefs at EU Forum

5 November 2008

On November 5 2008 we wrote as follows to Mr Luc Van den Brande, President, Committee of the Regions, about a Forum due to be held on 25-26 November 2008 on the subject "Intercultural dialogue at the heart of Europe's cities and regions":

Dear Mr Van den Brande

It is unfortunately unlikely that we shall be able to send a representative to this Forum, and for this reason I write to you to express our dismay that it appears to ignore the contribution of non-religious lifestyles and beliefs, despite the fact that between one-third and one-half of the people of Europe have no religious beliefs.

You will be aware that human rights instruments without exception guarantee freedom of 'religion or belief' and that 'belief' in this context includes non-religious beliefs and indeed the simple absence of beliefs of any kind. Indeed Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights has been definitively interpreted in this way by the European Court of Human Rights and, taken with Article 14, it requires that there should be no discrimination between religious and non-religious beliefs.

Moreover, under Declaration 11 to the Amsterdam Treaty and under Article 16C of the Maastricht Treaty as amended by the Lisbon Treaty [NB: now Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union] the European Union has committed itself to equal treatment of religious and non-religious lifestyles: the latter are described in these treaties as represented by "philosophical and non-confessional organizations". As a result the European Humanist Federation is a recognised partner for dialogue with the EU in the same way as the churches. Thus, for example, I am speaking at a conference on November 11 on "Intercultural dialogue: a challenge for faiths and convictions" organised within the framework of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008 by Directorate General for Education and Culture.

We are therefore very disturbed that your Forum is targeted on "Religious authorities and representative bodies" with no mention of "philosophical and non-confessional organizations". We are equally worried that the relevant session at the Forum is concerned with "how interfaith dialogue and cooperation with local and regional authorities can impact integration policies and contribute to social and cultural cohesion" where once again the use of the word "interfaith" excludes the non-religious and the seven speakers include six with explicit religious connections and none with a humanist or secularist viewpoint.

We regard as false and dangerous the idea that religion has a unique contribution to make to "integration policies" and "social and cultural cohesion". Viewing such policies within an exclusively religious framework yields a distorted and biased impression and risks alienating not only the large proportion of the population who

are not religious but also the many who do not wish their religious beliefs to predominate in social policy. Yet this is the approach that your Forum, representing the European Union, is intentionally promoting to those responsible for practical work on social cohesion, notably the public officials in local, regional and national authorities and their associations for whom your Forum is intended.

We realize that it is now too late to amend the programme for this Forum. We do, however, ask you most seriously to make some mention of our viewpoint and potential contribution in your own remarks at the opening of the relevant debate on 25 November.

We ask also that our contribution be included in future events of this nature.

Yours etc.

A reply was received dated 24 November as follows:

Thank you very much for your letter and your interest in the activities of the Committee of the Regions (CoR) and, in particular, in the Forum on Intercultural Dialogue which will be held at the CoR next 25 and 26 November. Your active participation in the different workshops organised at the CoR will be more than welcome, because target audience of our Forum are civil society stakeholders, international and pan-European organisations, amongst others.

I believe that philosophical and non-confessional organisations can positively contribute to the general debate and that they are not excluded in any of the discussions with our target audience.

As to the session on “interfaith dialogue and diversity: shared responsibilities” organised on 25 November as of 2.30 pm, the only session referring expressly to interfaith dialogue, let me stress that the aim of our Forum is to highlight the best practice achieved by regional or local authorities throughout Europe. To this end, we asked regional and local authorities to propose their best examples on this very topic. This is one – amongst others – way to strengthen intercultural dialogue at the local level. Cities, like Marseille or Malmo, and regions, like Catalonia, have responded to our invitation and will bring their own experience to the attention of a large European audience.

I am confident that your contribution will enrich our general debate and I look forward to meeting you at our Forum on Intercultural Dialogue at the heart of Europe’s regions and cities.

Yours sincerely

Luc Van den Brande