



European Humanist Federation  
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## Response by the European Humanist Federation to the consultation on the ERA Framework

### **Introduction :**

The European Humanist Federation was formed about 20 years ago to unite the organisations in Europe that represent people who have no religion but are committed to an ethical way of life and a non-religious morality. We have over 50 member organisations in over 20 countries, from Russia to Spain and from Norway to Greece, but mainly in the EU. We represent not only our member organisations and their members but also the views of a large part of the non-religious population in Europe who share the same values as ours. Today, between a third and a half of the people of Europe are effectively non-religious. In evidence we quote two large surveys carried out across the EU by Eurobarometer in 2005 and 2007. The first<sup>1</sup> showed that only 52% of EU citizens believe in God while 18% reject outright even the idea of 'some sort of spirit or life force' and the second<sup>2</sup> that 46% think religion has too important a place in society. It is not only that a large proportion of people do not have a religion, but the people of Europe as a whole do not see religion as important. When in autumn 2010<sup>3</sup> people were asked to pick up to three from a list of twelve 'values', they twice placed religion last: only 6% chose it as important to them personally and only 3% saw it as a value representative of the EU. Instead, the top places went to human rights, democracy, peace, and the rule of law. This result has been shown consistently in successive similar surveys.

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<sup>1</sup> Eurobarometer special survey: Social values, Science and Technology (European Commission, June 2005) available at [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs\\_225\\_report\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_225_report_en.pdf) - accessed 18 October 2010

<sup>2</sup> Eurobarometer 66: Public Opinion in the European Union (European Commission, September 2007) available at [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/eb/eb66/eb66\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb66/eb66_en.pdf) - accessed 18 October 2010

<sup>3</sup> Eurobarometer 74: Public Opinion in the European Union (European Commission, November 2010) available at [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/eb/eb74/eb74\\_publ\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb74/eb74_publ_en.pdf) - accessed 25 November 2011

As secularists we are strongly opposed to any attempt by religious institutions to impose on people outside their own congregations restrictions based solely on their own doctrines and dogmas. In the exercise of their free speech, they may seek to persuade, but the Roman Catholic Church in particular has shown a deplorable willingness to issue threats (of exclusion from communion etc) against politicians who step out of line, and some politicians have tended to confuse their private religious obedience with their obligations to serve the interests of the people who elected them. They and other public decision-makers should ignore all arguments that are based solely on religious doctrine.

Given this background, the European Humanist Federation welcomes the consultation on the new European Research Area (ERA) framework as it offers an excellent opportunity to foster the European Union's research capacities while taking into account the opinion of civil society organisations. Although the implementation of ERA is not of direct concern to us, we think that a humanist contribution is valuable insofar as this project contains several ethical issues which need to be answered at the EU level.

### **Building a common European approach and practices on ethics: a science-based and free research**

Ethical issues involving the beginning and the end of life or the use of embryonic stem cells in research programmes are part of these "grand societal challenges" the European Union in general and European research in particular have to meet. As humanists we are thus the last to deny that ethical considerations must play a part in directing both the objectives and the methods of research. But the ethical framework for such decisions must rest on shared principles and values and not on religious dogmas believed only by minorities.

Nor should ethical - let alone religious - considerations be allowed to detract from the scientific validity of the research. Scientific research, whatever one's ambitions for it, should be conceived and conducted as an open research for truth, with a determination to follow the evidence. It is not scientific to seek to validate pre-conceived conclusions decided in advance by the agenda of organisations or political representatives aimed at legitimizing specific political or philosophical positions. The contribution of the Roman Catholic Church through its representatives (COMECE) to the "Common Strategic Framework for future EU Research and Innovation Funding" is a blatant illustration of this kind of instrumentalization : the Bishops propose that the EU should sponsor research to deliver empirical proofs of their own contested view of the social efficiency of « traditional » families by comparison with other « intrinsically instable » family structures<sup>4</sup>. No one with any notion of how scientific research is conducted could possibly make such a self-serving proposal.

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<sup>4</sup> In French in the text : *"une recherche qui donne les preuves empiriques de cette efficacité sociale par rapport aux autres structures familiales qui sont intrinsèquement plus instables et qui représentent, au départ, des risques sociaux plus élevés – risques de pauvreté, d'exclusion, de décrochage scolaire, de santé plus fragile et de compétences moins élevées."* - Réponse du Secrétariat de la COMECE (Commission des Évêchés de la Communauté Européenne) à la consultation publique ouverte sur le LIVRE VERT « *Quand les défis deviennent des chances: vers un cadre stratégique commun pour le financement de la recherche et de l'innovation dans l'UE* », p. 4.

We ask that the new European research area framework expressly favours freedom of research, scientific methodology and rational, evidence-based reasoning.

### **Clarifying the European approach to research based on embryonic stem cells**

We wish to make one very specific and concrete proposal. We urge most emphatically that there should be no continuation of the current block on EU support for research using embryonic stem cells. The ban of such funding in the 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Program adopted in 2006 is almost entirely the result of pressure from the Roman Catholic Bishops. Their reasoning was (and still is) based on the Catholic religious doctrine of the personhood of the embryo from the moment of fertilisation. In their response to the consultation on the “Common Strategic Framework”, the Bishops say:

Human embryonic stem cells, in fact, can be extracted only from human embryos used for this purpose and then discarded, and thus treated as pure laboratory material, in violation of their dignity as human beings and therefore their natural right to life. The Church champions the defence of the inherent dignity of all members of the human community and thus the sanctity of the lives of everyone of us, whose value is never diminished even in its most vulnerable stages at the beginning and end of life<sup>5</sup>.

Their premise is that human life starts at conception and should immediately have the full protection accorded to everyone after birth. This leads naturally and without argument to their rejection of embryonic stem cell research - and also to their rejection of *in vitro* fertilisation (IVF). Just as with their rejection of contraception and abortion, the premise is religious. And just as with IVF, contraception and abortion, it is a doctrine that has been rejected not only by the huge majority of society but also by a substantial proportion of the Church’s own congregation.

None of this means that arguments from respect for life and for human dignity are illegitimate: far from it, but they need to be pursued in ways that are comprehensible - and contestable - by everyone, not based on unquestionable religious doctrine, and that starts from the facts.

The argument should therefore take account of considerations such as the following:

- First, many of the embryos used in embryonic stem cells research (ESCR) are supernumerary embryos left over from IVF treatment. A 2009 study in US Journal *Fertility and Sterility* discovered that approximately 95% of embryos are discarded during the IVF process<sup>6</sup>. This means that these embryos could never result in a live birth. Furthermore, the embryos used to derive stem cells are never transferred into

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<sup>5</sup> The original French text reads : « Les cellules souches embryonnaires humaines, en effet, ne peuvent être prélevées que sur des embryons humains utilisés à cette fin puis rejetés, traités par conséquent en pur matériau de laboratoire, en simple réservoir de cellules, au mépris de leur dignité d’êtres humains et donc de leur droit naturel à la vie. L’Eglise se fait le champion de la défense de la dignité intrinsèque de tous les membres de la communauté humaine et donc de l’inviolabilité de la vie de chacun d’entre nous, dont la valeur ne diminue jamais même dans les étapes les plus vulnérables, au commencement et à la fin de la vie », p.7

<sup>6</sup> Study available on <http://www.fertstert.org>

the human body and are donated for medical research only when parents decide they are no longer needed for fertility treatment<sup>7</sup>.

- Second, many conscientious objectors to ESCR draw comparisons with the debate on abortion, which is a misleading analogy given the nature of the organisms involved. As the University of Michigan states: “Embryos [used for stem cell research], called blastocysts, are spheres containing about 100 cells. They have no nervous system, no heart, and no specialized tissues”<sup>8</sup>. According to the majority of scientists, embryos which have not been implanted into the uterus do not have the physical – let alone the emotional – properties which are usually associated to a person. Philosophically speaking, we think that something which has *only the potential to become* a person *cannot* at this very early (blastocyst) development stage, be granted human rights<sup>9</sup>.

=> Given the very varied national legislation on embryonic stem cell research, we understand but do not endorse the European Union’s reluctance to take a strong line on the issue. But the current situation is seriously inconsistent and unsatisfactory. It bans EU funding for the stages of research that involve destruction of human embryos<sup>10</sup> while allowing it for subsequent steps involving embryonic stem cells<sup>11</sup>. In countries where national funding is totally disallowed for ESCR, it entails a situation where researchers can benefit from EU funding only for specific steps of their research, and not for the whole project.

As humanists, we are strongly committed to improving the conditions of life for all mankind, which must include giving a high priority to overcoming disease, including inherited disabilities. As a consequence, it would in our view be unconscionable if the European Union were to bow before religious pressure and continue to inhibit valuable research of great potential benefit out of deference to the Roman Catholic Church. We therefore ask the European Union to clarify its ambiguous position, to step away from its present ambiguously conservative policy and to commit itself to firm support for European researchers by allowing EU funding for research based on embryonic stem cells

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<sup>7</sup> See for example the study conducted in Sweden from 2001 to 2002 and published in Human reproduction where it is said that 92% of couples agree to give their supernumerary embryos for stem cell research : <http://humrep.oxfordjournals.org/content/18/6/1353.full>

<sup>8</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.umich.edu/stemcell/faq/#section3>

<sup>9</sup> We should also precise here that different religions take different views on this specific issue : Judaism and Islam argue that the embryo does not attain full human status before 40 days, so both these religions permit some research on embryos in view of the importance of helping others.

<sup>10</sup> Art. 6 DECISION No 1982/2006/EC OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 18 December 2006 concerning the Seventh Framework Programme of the European Community for research, technological development and demonstration activities (2007-2013) “The following fields of research shall not be financed under this Framework Programme: research activity aiming at human cloning for reproductive purposes, research activity intended to modify the genetic heritage of human beings which could make such changes heritable (2), research activities intended to create human embryos solely for the purpose of research or for the purpose of stem cell procurement, including by means of somatic cell nuclear transfer.”, on <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/>

<sup>11</sup> Point 12 of the annex Declaration to the FP7 on <http://eur-lex.europa.eu>

**Conclusion:**

By designing the European research area framework, the European Commission shows its real concern about the lack of harmonization regarding research in Europe. We are clear that this effort towards a better coordination should be based on ethical – but not religious - principles and practices. We therefore urge the European Commission to exploit the capacity of scientific research to meet the grand societal challenges ahead and to make the EU a progressive worldwide actor. In our view, this can only be done if the ERA framework expressly stands for:

- Research based on science and reason;
- Research that is independent and non-instrumentalized;
- Research that includes innovative and audacious work in the field of bioethics.

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