



THE EUROPEAN DREAM
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A LETTER TO PRESIDENT BARROSO

Dear President Barroso

On the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome it is right to take stock. Not only has the Common Market evolved into the European Union, not only has the end of the Cold War changed the global context, but Europe's people, our communities and our lives have changed hugely in fifty years. We are far more prosperous; technology has radically changed our lives; we travel far more often to each other's countries, make our homes abroad, and we welcome people from all the world. Our national ways of life have borrowed from each other and from far more exotic cultures. We look back now on many of our attitudes of the 1950s as ignorant and intolerant, albeit for some more comfortable and less questioning of inherited traditions.

Has anything remained the same?

We believe it has. The underlying values of Europe show a continuity that provides a firm foundation for building the future. These are in part the values that, even longer ago than the Treaty of Rome, found expression in the European Convention of Human Rights. They are profoundly humanist in that they place ultimate value on the lives of individual human beings.

They recognise the autonomy of the individual and his or her freedom to make choices about how to live – and, to ensure that this freedom is not merely theoretical, they promote a widening of real possibilities. They demand democratic government, as being the best way for autonomous individuals to live collectively in society – but mere democratic forms are insufficient, for the majority can be as oppressive as any dictator.

Government must therefore guarantee unfettered freedom of belief and minimally fettered freedom of expression and action. Tolerance is thus deeply engraved in the European canon of values – and tolerance, of course, is tested only when faced with what it finds difficult to bear.

But these values we share – characteristically, but not of course exclusively European – are not solely related to the individual. They recognise the value of community action, based on widely shared interests that can be best – or only – achieved collectively. Fulfilment for most of us comes from living together: individually we each have many identities – related to our ancestry, our nationality, our family, our beliefs and interests and much more – most of which refer to what we share with a kaleidoscope of sets of other people.

Having started with what unites us, I now point to one factor that does not unite. Contrary to some powerful voices, religion – and specifically Christianity – does not bring us together but instead divides us. Religious spokesmen (rarely women) like to refer to their beliefs as 'humanist' but this is a thin and meagre 'humanism' that is merely a restraint upon their devotion to a transcendent realm, a label adopted under pressure of criticism.

Indeed, the assertion that Europe's values are founded in Christianity is deeply offensive to many, is in need of serious qualification if it is not simply false, and can be claimed only by those who ignore some of the values that genuinely unite us.

As to the falsity of the claim, consider the facts. All human communities share very similar moral attitudes (seeing virtue in courage, compassion, truthfulness, friendship etc), attitudes enshrined in moral codes dating from long before Christianity: (the 'golden rule' antedates Christianity by at least 600 years). Democratic governance was an invention of the Athenian city-state, likewise centuries before Christianity, while the modern articulation of human rights came from essentially secular sources. Moreover, the suggestion that Europe is today predominantly Christian is equally false, even if we disregard the numbers who follow non-Christian religions. Plainly, with the history we share, our culture has been deeply influenced by Christian ideas, stories and iconography.

But a merely cultural identification with the Christian tradition is not the same as being Christian. The fact is that since the Enlightenment and at an pace real religious belief has been in decline. No single survey is definitive and the wording and context of questions seriously affects the answers people give, but by any account a very large minority of people across Europe by now has no religious belief, with a distinct majority of non-believers in several countries. (1)

Not all those who reject Christianity and the religious alternatives are humanists, and not all who are humanists themselves adopt that label. For Humanism is at root a label for those whose naturalistic understanding of the universe and of life within it – depending as it does on an empirical reliance on evidence and a rational assessment of its meaning, scientific in the right context but equally respectful of the emotional and aesthetic dimensions of human nature – makes transcendental hypotheses untenable while simultaneously leading to a recognition of the deep roots of human moral capacity – the result of our evolution as social beings since long before we were even human.

Some of us articulate these beliefs and attitudes as a non-religious 'lifestance' or 'world-view' – a positive belief system that we see as filling for us the place that religion fills for its believers. Others of us see such an articulation as unnecessary or as too closely resembling the religious systems we reject. No matter: Humanism, despite a tradition of writing and thinking that can be traced back to ancient times, remains only a convenient label for a defined range of beliefs: it has no sacred books or infallible leaders, being an attitude that emphasises personal responsibility and questioning of assumptions.

But our beliefs lead us to embrace the ideal of an open society – one that is “based on the recognition that people have divergent views and interests and that nobody is in possession of the ultimate truth”. (2) Such a society therefore tries to accommodate the widest variety of views and interests among its citizens – a necessity in today's multi-cultural communities. It celebrates diversity while promoting cohesion.

One consequence of this is that society must be secular – in the sense of the government and official institutions remaining carefully neutral on matters of religion or belief.

There is no necessity for a modern state to commit itself to a religion (or to atheism or any non-religious belief) and it should not. By doing so it immediately alienates many of its citizens.

The same is true of the European Union itself: it has no remit in religious affairs and should stay clear of them. It should certainly not give a privileged status to organisations representing religions or beliefs, thereby risking reviving the religious conflicts of past ages. Instead, the views of such organisations, not least the churches, should be tested in the public forum along with other non-governmental organisations.

This is not a matter merely of expediency, although it is certainly more conducive than the alternative to building a cohesive sense of European citizenship across the community. Rather, it is a matter of principle based on safeguarding the human rights of its citizens to unfettered freedom of religion or belief.

Indeed, even if a clear and overwhelming majority of European citizens were Christian (or Muslim, or atheist) we should still hold that society should sufficiently value freedom of belief and expression that it should refrain from embedding in its constitution, laws and institutions any privilege for those of that majority belief.

In sum, our shared European values point to the need for an open society with institutions that refrain from limiting possibilities except where it is unavoidable – and in which our individual “ultimate beliefs” about the nature of life and the universe are irrelevant to the civil organisation of society.

In this pamphlet, produced to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Rome, our main paper presents a clear statement of the values and aspirations that we believe are those of the great majority of Europeans. We set our “European Dream” – a vision of a Europe in which democracy is participative as well as representative. It is a Europe in which our shared citizenship creates a true solidarity and cohesion across the continent, thereby contributing to the struggle against poverty and social exclusion. It is a Europe respectful of everyone’s freedom, where unfair discrimination on irrelevant grounds – sex, sexuality, age, race, disability, religion or belief – has no place. It offers a landmark of tolerance in a troubled world. And one serious consequence of all this is that it is a Europe where organisations representing religions or beliefs – the churches in particular but not exclusively – enjoy no legislative or institutional privilege, for such privileges ipso facto constitute discrimination against citizens who do not share the privileged beliefs, including that large number who have no religion.

Let me conclude by returning to our shared values. We also reprint here the Brussels Declaration, of which the European Humanist Federation is one sponsor organisation. This brief summary of shared European values sprang from collaboration between several individuals, humanists, Muslims and Christians, differing in their intensely personal ‘ultimate beliefs’, religious or otherwise, but united

in approach to the values that unite us as a community in Europe. It has been endorsed by a wide range of leading personalities holding a wide range of beliefs who are distinguished in many fields – politics, religion, academic studies and so on – and it will undoubtedly attract wide agreement from people throughout Europe. We are grateful for your recent invitation to meet you and look forward to enlarging on some of these ideas.

Yours sincerely
David Pollock
President, European Humanist Federation
March 2007

¹ See 'Atheism: Contemporary Numbers and Patterns' in The Cambridge Companion to Atheism (Cambridge University Press, 2007)

² George Soros: appendix to The Bubble of American Supremacy (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004)

THE EUROPEAN DREAM

The European Humanist Federation (EHF) presents hereafter some viewpoints on Europe and the European Union proposed by several secular "think-tanks", together with some guidelines for action. This is the presentation of "The European Dream", the follow up of which EHF and several partners are trying to give birth.

INTRODUCTION: WHEN EUROPE AWAKES . . .

Europe has successfully developed both economic and legal integration (the common market and community law) in step with the globalisation of trade, finance and technology.

By contrast, in the political, social and cultural sphere, the variety of prevailing values in different member states has prevented the development of a specific European model, and so in these areas Europe has resigned itself to making claims for exceptional treatment within the framework of globalisation. In this way it has lost its ability to influence world events, as witness its powerlessness to make heard a responsible voice of reason over the noise of wars and conflicts that pepper the globe.

The 50th anniversary of the signature of the Treaty of Rome is an opportunity to reflect on the values that in future might conduce to the construction of a political, social and cultural Europe that could help produce peace, stability and a vision of the future.

In a world torn apart by the tyranny of profit and ravaged by the violence of unbridled selfishness, our continent has a duty to engage in the much-needed restoration of civilisation that is under way. Europe must find an independent identity and make its own alliances. And this requires that the peoples of the community understand the sources of their identity and have confidence in their joint membership. This self-governing Europe would certainly wish to be humanist, peaceful and co-operative.

But how can we bring about this sort of forward-looking plan? Is our duty as citizens not to find new ways to promote human dignity, social cohesion, cultural richness and individual self-determination as the planet is shaken by major upheavals?

The world, caught between armchair strategy and the facts on the ground, is rapidly exhausting its material and moral reserves, without any offsetting enhancement of its creative potential in the realms of emotion, the spirit, knowledge and reason.

So is this not a suitable time to seek a new balance between material frugality and emotional and cultural appetites?

And the task of evaluating and promoting European values that link invention, resolution and a forward-looking humanism would seem to be open to the supporters of participative democracy.

A LENGTHY DEVELOPMENT

The idea of Europe arose from a lengthy development interspersed with wars and conquests. From the Greco-Roman age to Napoleon, by way of Charlemagne and the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V down to the bloody explosions of the two latest – and hopefully last – world wars.

Europe started as an uneasy juxtaposition of rival empires, of conquerors and all-powerful monarchs. The Catholic Church was for a long time the only spiritual power, made use of by powerful politicians the better to control people's minds. All thinking that offered any competition was brutally suppressed. The atrocities of the Inquisition were the most extreme manifestation of a religious totalitarianism. The thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – Spinoza in the Netherlands, Kant in Germany, Locke and Hume in Britain, and Voltaire, Rousseau and Condorcet in France, to cite no others – laid the foundations for a new culture, and a social humanism asserted itself in response to a world of violence. The philosophers of the Enlightenment, from the protection of the sympathetic royal courts, greatly helped to spread the bright rays of these ideas.

Among the peoples that had been the principal victims of their rulers' appetites for conquest and power the longing for peace intensified. Faced with the autocratic regimes of monarchs or dictators, through uprisings and revolutions populations showed their longing for Dignity, Law and Justice to be acknowledged. The principle of Democracy, invented by the Greeks, was step by step confirmed as a fundamental principle, putting mankind at the centre of decisions by making people the masters of their own destinies.

The Citizen replaced the Subject. Nationhood was the expression of a feeling of belonging together, of a collective consciousness, of a people sharing a common cultural inheritance with its history and its ordeals.

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights lent reinforcement to what had already been set out by Tom Paine and the American and French Revolutions.

These principles are recognised by all the European democracies. They have all signed up to the 1950 European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and

Fundamental Freedoms. Ratification and implementation of this convention is a condition of joining the European Union. The rule of law is now part of the shared heritage of the people of Europe. Freedom of belief and freedom of conscience are recognised as a matter of principle even if the way they have been put into effect varies with the history of individual member states of the Union.

From then on, by contrast with the situation under the 'ancien regime', the law and legal rights are no longer the privilege of religious or autocratic powers but derive from the choices of representatives democratically elected by the citizens.

This is a principle of all parliamentary democracy that, in Europe, differs fundamentally from the 'religious tradition'.

THE SECULARISATION OF SOCIETY

At the end of the eighteenth century, tolerance saw the beginning of a great upheaval. Until then the Church had controlled education and indeed individuals' private lives, through baptismal registers, religious weddings, the registration of deaths, religious funerals, moral teaching. . .

By way of example, take the promulgation in 1781 by Joseph II, the emperor of Austria and the Low Countries, of the Edict of Tolerance, which sought by means of equality of treatment to maintain religious peace among all the citizens of his empire. This edict comprises many provisions that give non-Catholics – principally Protestants and Jews – the same rights as Catholics already enjoyed. Registration of births, marriages and deaths by public authorities, a right to divorce, judicial reform to remove the privileges of the nobility and clergy are the main innovatory reforms that followed.

The reforms under Joseph II's Edict of Tolerance are a move towards the 'secularisation' of society, making public life independent of religious prescriptions which, of course, individual citizens were free to follow for themselves.

Secularisation of 'public services' notably affected the public school system, poor relief, the beginnings of public hospitals, setting up of official civil registers, recognition of civil marriages and funerals. The idea of voluntary limitation of births appeared in the middle of the nineteenth century. . .

All these were concrete examples of a progressive secularisation of European society.

The secularisation of the law was important: no more hanging for blasphemy, conviction for failure to observe religious practice, torture to obtain confessions in the manner of the Holy Inquisition.

Overall, the process of secularisation outlined above, without being anti-religious, allowed a progressively marked mixing of different ideas, religious as much as philosophical.

EUROPEAN IDENTITY AND SHARED VALUES

The question of European identity is crucial for the future of the European Union: it brings up the question of what values Europeans have in common and acknowledge sharing agree to share.

The final shape of the new Europe cannot be defined without a clear understanding of what today ties Europeans together in a world that is open to global influences. To help citizens in the process of European integration, it is important to understand what our European identity consists in and what are the values on which the European project is based.

Faced with the new challenges of globalisation and the uncertainties it brings, the problem of European identity and its values surfaces again in the debates about the future shape of Europe. Globalisation results in the emergence of new cultural territory and supports the formation of eclectic identities.

This problem was never easy to solve given that many who have considered the question call for a European culture of universal application.

That there is a heritage, a shared cultural patrimony, made up of various spiritual, artistic and intellectual elements, there can be no doubt.

But movements of population, the massive flow of migrants from outside Europe, along with the kaleidoscope of images in the media, make it the more difficult to identify what is properly European. So it would seem pointless to regard European culture, in the strict sense, as a binding factor, the indispensable glue for the emergence and development of a European citizenship, as some commentators, preoccupied with the current identity crisis, are trying to do – at the risk of developing identity-asserting behaviours of a sort that may generate conflict.

Indeed, it seems vital to promote cultural pluralism as precisely one of the values that characterise European society.

There are thus other values than a mere cultural identity that are essential foundations for a feeling of belonging to the European community.

A qualitative leap forward towards the definition of European values that lend meaning to the European project came with the Treaty to establish a European Constitution adopted by heads of state and government in Rome on 29 October 2004.

In the Preamble the very first paragraph reads as follows:

Drawing inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, from which have developed the universal values of the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law. . .

In Part I, on the institutions of the Union, Article I-2 specifies its values:

The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.

These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, social cohesion and equality between women and men prevail.

Elsewhere, Article I-3, devoted to the Union's objectives, specifies that it respects its rich cultural and linguistic diversity, and shall ensure that Europe's cultural heritage is safeguarded and enhanced.

The opening address at the Convention on the Future of Europe, which was charged with preparing this constitutional treaty, illuminates the shared vision that prevailed at the start of its work: "I hope that all of us Europeans, and all the peoples of Europe, can live together in a truly unified Europe where the identity and security of the national populations, the communities and the national minorities is so firmly guaranteed and respected that their diversity can deeply enrich our shared prosperity and deepen our tolerance."

But do all these values and principles that are supposed to be shared and common to Europeans live up to the vision people have of European society?

We have to ask whether these founding values of the European Union, such as those stated above, are exhaustive and representative of the European identity.

In other words, could there be other values passed over in silence that escaped the attention of the convention members charged with drafting the European constitution?

For the European Humanist Federation and for citizens who demand a secular society, it is difficult to accept that principles such as freedom of speech, of thought and of conscience and the principle of the strict neutrality of the State were not rehearsed expressly and explicitly among the values and founding principles of the European Union.

Values and Counter-Values

Moral values postulate a continuous effort by humans to improve. They involve a conscious process aimed at producing a sense of meaning in our actions. Opposed to these inspiring humanist values are those that obstruct human progress. No society can escape this duality. No moral value will ever be definitively established as victorious over the forces opposed to it.

Europe has to face its demons. Nationalism is a centrifugal force that undermines international solidarity and friendship between peoples.

On a more global scale, the cult of the primacy of individual success over collective effort, and the excess of competition within and between groups are harmful centrifugal forces.

In the absence of harmonised fiscal and social arrangements, unfair competition intensifies between individuals and peoples. Economic ultra-liberalism favours “social dumping” which sets one part of Europe against another.

Racial, cultural, economic and social discrimination, with the vexations and assaults on human dignity it brings, threatens our ability to live together. The same is true of discrimination in education, housing and employment.

Fundamentalism and religious sectarianism that lead to an emphasis on narrow communities are forces that detract from universalism.

Religions today as in the past give meaning to the lives of many Europeans. But likewise today as in the past they too often convey nonsense and errors, not to mention lies and hatred. Too often religions are to blame for conflicts. Previously, religious intolerance was the constant practice in Europe and it was difficult to impose on the dominant religion acceptance of a religious freedom that was for the benefit of minority religions.

Religious intrusion into the European debate is not insignificant. The Vatican is a state based on religion and has not signed the European Convention on Human Rights. Its frenzied lobbying aimed at keeping Europe under its control came plainly into the light of day during the preparation of the Constitution. And these manoeuvres were helped by the democratic deficit of the Union.

For some years there have been attempts from various directions to introduce into EU official texts references to God, to the religious heritage, transcendence or again the contribution of the churches to EU policy. These claims have been supported by intense lobbying.

These claims add up to a regrettable discrimination against the numerous citizens of Europe who do not belong to a religion.

The European Humanist Federation holds that citizenship in a democratic European Union cannot be based on religious convictions or statements based on some form of transcendence.

THE IDEA OF A EUROPEAN SOCIAL MODEL

One of the many values that the citizens of Europe have in common and wish to share in is the European social model. This is a defining concept that differentiates what Europe is building from international groupings elsewhere in the world.

The concept was set out in the conclusions of the European Council at Barcelona on 15-16 March 2002, where it was stated that the European social model, founded as it was “on a successful economy, a high level of social protection, education and social

dialogue, was a balance between economic prosperity and social justice” and guaranteed genuine recognition of the social partners.

It is based on the one hand on the various systems of social protection found in the individual EU member states and on the other on the social measures introduced by the various EU treaties and by the rulings of the European Court of Justice.

THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL MODEL IN CRISIS

The European social model is in crisis particularly because social tensions are becoming progressively more serious. They manifest themselves as new social demands that the national and European systems cannot easily accommodate.

These tensions are linked to the appearance of new social insecurities connected with our transformation into post-industrial societies (rapid obsolescence of qualifications, inadequate provisions for the insecurity of employment, discontinuity of professional careers, contracting out of low value added services, relocation of industrial activity . . .), and with the development of factors such as ageing populations, single-parent families, working women, conflicts between family life and employment, demands for safety from all risks, and of new ways of life – urban growth, geographic mobility, weakened local loyalties and greater dependence on public services by people with reduced resources. . .

These problems are often beyond the scope of national intervention. Rather, it is a matter of managing the social consequences of globalisation, and of adapting retirement and social security systems to the greater mobility of the people of Europe or to the flexibility of the labour market.

Add to that the incorporation into the European Union of new member states from central Europe without sufficient account being taken of the differences of wealth, in terms of GDP, between them and the first fifteen members, the pernicious effects of which have not been adequately assessed – notably, social and fiscal dumping , which new member states resort to in order to accelerate their economic catching up. Whatever measures are envisaged for future revision of the European Union treaties, it is right that their provisions should correspond more to the wishes of the peoples of Europe for greater social cohesion and not rest simply on competition and the laws of the market.

SOCIAL COHESION

The public sector guarantees equal treatment for everyone and contributes importantly to social cohesion. If we wish to prevent or reduce social division, we must give public services their proper role in the face of market forces.

That can only happen with a public sector capable of counterbalancing market influences in guaranteeing the basic services to which all citizens without exception must have access.

Civic, social, cultural and educational responsibilities resulting from Community policies will be taken on by the public services and not devolved to private bodies.

The European Humanist Federation demands that public undertakings and undertakings providing services of general economic interest be guaranteed to all citizens without exception and that all necessary measures be taken with a view to strengthening public services in the following areas: education, culture, health, personal security, worker protection, protection of the environment, help for the underprivileged, aged and disabled.

TOWARDS A EUROPE OF CITIZENS

Europe as an alternative to the excesses of globalised finance, Europe as the definition of a cultural, social and economic space, overtaking national divisions while safeguarding a human dimension that transcends cross-border networks – the stakes are high.

There is an extra perspective, more symbolic and so charged with meaning: Europe as an opportunity for its inhabitants to create a new identity for themselves.

This all being so, we must not be blind to the realities and risks that are entailed – risks of bringing about fresh social exclusion, risks of over-attention to the economics of Europe, risks of technocratic power without democratic control.

We must therefore be watchful that our Europe is so constructed that it gives priority to values of general interest and lends itself to the elaboration of a participative and cohesive code of citizenship.

Participative Democracy

The European Humanist Federation supports the development within the European Union's participative democracy of a lively third sector of voluntary organisations. Voluntary organisations cover a wide field and for this reason can constitute the motor for the development of a vision of society. It is only if citizens have the feeling that their concerns and expectations are taken into account that they will be able to commit – or recommit – themselves to the European project.

Participative democracy requires more than giving politicians a blank cheque for the interval of years between elections. Besides, election manifestos do not generally go into details on the many questions that can arise between elections.

This shows that civil society plays a double role: it can be a useful stepping stone towards policy-making without however being a substitute for it. In so doing, it contributes to the maintenance and development of an active citizenship. By succeeding in this double process, it can contribute on the one hand to reviving politics and democracy and on the other to increasing the interest of citizens in the future shape of society.

So civil society can have a social and civic function and provide a counterweight to the experts of every type who contribute to decision-making. It contributes to the maintenance and development of a feeling of citizenship.

All the same, it is sensible to insist on demanding that organisations asking to be recognised have a legitimacy based on internal democracy. This requirement for organisations to be democratically representative must be applied to the various bodies seeking a dialogue with the European Union in the name of civil society,

whether they are non-governmental organisations, religious or philosophical associations – or indeed churches.

The European Union would go wrong in its choice of partners for dialogue if it agreed to give a platform to bodies that ‘provide meaning’ but do not have the legitimacy of a democratic mandate from the citizens, or to exclude any that do.

Towards a Democratic European Public Space

If it is proper to require all actors who take part in the business of civil society to be representative, it is equally necessary to define the representative body to undertake the consultation. The new empowering of citizens at the European level requires a partner for a direct dialogue politically responsible for its acts to the European electors and endowed with the powers conferred by democracy on its elected representatives. Face to face with the citizen, only the democratically elected politician is responsible to the electorate and can be held to account by them.

For is not electoral accountability the first right of a representative democracy ?

Currently at the level of the European Union, the logic of parliamentary democracy points to the members of the European Parliament and those mandated by them. The European Parliament has a direct legitimacy and a political responsibility to the European citizens who elect it, and the Commission has the power to act on its proposals.

To develop a European citizenship, a democratic European public space needs to be created. This is why the European Humanist Federation has proposed that a structured dialogue be organised between civil society and the European institutions under the political responsibility of the European Parliament.

IN SUPPORT OF A SECULAR EUROPE

State neutrality

The progressive secularisation of society and the emergence of democratic states leads logically to the rule that the State must deal with all its citizens on equal terms whatever their political, religious or philosophical beliefs.

The religious and moral laws issued by the ecclesiastical authorities are no longer state laws and reciprocally the state denies itself the right to involve itself in religious matters.

This is a basic principle of the secular state.

State secularism is a benign concept to which the faithful of all religions can adhere as well as atheists and agnostics.

“Secularism implies a strict separation between those factors that make for political cohesion, which takes its shape from the creation of a social structure defined by law, and those that are dependent on social bonds, which make possible, within the limits of public order, patterns of behaviour that belong to our private lives as members of various communities.” (J.M. Ducomte)

This is the meaning of that much misunderstood short formula “religion in the private sphere”.

“In terms of law, what is public is whatever concerns all the people of a nation or of a political community. The private is that which is of interest to one person or a number of people, freely associating in (for example) a religious community. The collective dimension of a religious confession does not therefore confer on it any public status, since that status has to correspond to something that is universally shared.” (H. Pena Ruis)

State neutrality is the way that it is clearly affirmed that the state and its institutions cannot privilege one group of citizens or another on the basis of their philosophical or religious affiliation.

State neutrality then demands that the state exercise impartiality in relation to the various systems of belief. No religion or other belief can be privileged, none can be excluded to the advantage of another. In other words, no belief can enjoy discriminatory treatment by the public authorities.

Non-Discrimination: a Basic Principle

Yet discrimination can be seen in all member states and all candidate countries, with the victims coming from various sections of society: women, Jews, members of religious minorities and religions without official recognition, but also those who are not religious: the non-believers.

These discriminations occur in education, religious and social life, lack of respect for private life, political privileges, official ceremonies that are exclusively religious, etc. It is time that it was realised that very many citizens committed to democracy who practise no religion are increasingly unwilling to accept this discrimination.

Good European governance must be vigilant that legislation and customs involving the churches and religion in the countries of the Union do not discriminate against citizens of different beliefs or those who do not belong to any religion.

It is still necessary to take notice, despite noteworthy progress, of extensive discrimination suffered by women through failure of society to treat men and women equally. Inequalities found in many sections of society as a result of family or cultural pressure foster the inequalities that can be seen at the level of employment and social welfare.

Employment and social law, which in part link to European Union competencies, are two areas where the Union could take action on sex equality.

No special status for Churches

Religions and the churches are meant to bring added value to the Union by shaping our consciences and hence our idea of citizenship through their delivery of a ‘message’ that comes notionally in two forms, one resting on the transcendental, from which springs the other, comprising rules of morality.

For its part the Commission pursues its task of “bonding together a union of peoples”. Some surprise is permitted that the European Commission should leave this function exclusively to the churches at a time when the majority of citizens barely practise their religion any longer. They no longer follow church teachings on family life, marriage and cohabitation, divorce, abortion and contraception, bioethics, etc.

It does not amount to an attack on religious beliefs to remark similarly that in many areas the moral rules and codes of social conduct promoted by the churches are not the models shared and followed by many people.

Their loss of support, their diversity and sometimes their competition with each other means that these models are no longer today effectively shared and have de facto lost all claim to “bond together a union of peoples”. This is particularly striking in matters concerning the rights of women, homosexuals, and everything touching on sexuality and reproduction.

People who no longer obey religious instructions develop beliefs just as respectable as those of “believers” and often very demanding. It is not only that the churches and religions no longer have a monopoly of values: we can measure the gap between the alternative positions by taking the example of the struggle against AIDS. On one side we have the refusal to use condoms, on the opposite side the campaigns for their use by numerous international institutions with majority popular support.

While the churches declare that they are part of civil society and register their willingness for dialogue, how can we understand the religious hierarchies’ demand that a separate Article, no. 52, should be written into the European Constitution to govern its dialogue with EU institutions distinct from Article 47 which covers the organisations of civil society?

Giving the churches a special status in EU institutions amounts to establishing discrimination between citizens who believe in transcendental divinity and those who do not.

Freedom of Expression and of Conscience

“Some people believe in a god. Others believe in several. Others stay agnostic and refuse to decide. Others finally are atheists. All have to live together. And this shared life, since the first Declaration of the Rights of Man, has to ensure freedom of conscience and equality of rights for all people simultaneously.” (Henri Pena Ruiz)

Freedom of conscience includes the freedom to believe or not to believe, to belong or not to belong to one religion or another and to change from one to another, without any religion or belief benefiting from any privilege or suffering any constraints that detract from the rights it shares with all the rest. This pluralism is indispensable if we are to live together.

Without freedom of expression there is no pluralism. Thus, freedom of expression applies not just to information or ideas that are welcomed with favour or considered inoffensive or of no importance, but also to information and ideas that offend, shock or worry.

All the same, freedom of expression is not unlimited: a speech, a book, a picture can amount to incitement to hatred, to violence or to discrimination against an individual, a group, a community or their members, by reason of race, colour, ancestry or national or ethnic origin. Then it is reprehensible and can be forbidden in accordance with human rights law.

As the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe observed (June 2006): “Freedom of expression should not be further restricted in response to the growing sensitivity of certain religious groups”.

The European Humanist Federation is opposed to all attempts to limit, by legislation or jurisprudence, the right to challenge and criticise within the limits of human rights law beliefs and religions, their doctrines and the actions of those who profess them. The European Humanist Federation will pursue its call for mutual understanding that transcends traditions and beliefs. It invites people to build bridges between groups, to bear witness to what unites us, to support all those who struggle for progress and to rally everyone, man or woman, who can draw out from our collective memory everything that conduces to dialogue and modernity.

Ethical questions

Currently a number of worrying ethical questions is dividing opinion. Many of these relate to the beginning or the end of human life.

Should scientific research on human embryos be allowed or banned, or should it be subject to regulations? Should any form of cloning be allowed? What should be our attitude to an invalid, ravaged by some disease and with no hope of recovery, who insists that he be helped to die?

Secular organisations have for a long time addressed the questions that new medical techniques and greater biological knowledge pose for society. How can adequate protection be put in place without depriving ourselves of new scientific developments that could be beneficial to humanity?

First of all, what criteria should the rules be based on? A secular approach gives two criteria pride of place: respect for the quality of people’s lives and preservation of the environment.

Secularism presumes the existence of a permanent debate within society to promote pluralism and tolerance in the public space. Ethical committees, for example, are in a position to initiate debate within society so long as they are well balanced in terms of members from the fields of philosophy, science and culture, but equally must take care that they do not take the place of accountable politicians whose role it is democratically to take all decisions about laws.

The cultural dimension

“European culture is not simply a culture whose most significant products – Humanism, Reason, Science – are secular. It is above all a culture that is entirely secularised, in the sense that, from a particular moment in time, no idea has

remained so holy or so evil that it can escape from the turmoil of debate, discussion and polemic.” (E. Morin)

The European Commission has repeatedly emphasised the need to create the conditions in which meaning can be given to European citizenship.

It will certainly not be by handing over to spiritual, religious or other guides, that people will be imbued with a meaning to give to their existence, like a sort of European infusion.

On the contrary it is better to foster conditions in which the cultural dimensions of society can flourish.

Culture is to be understood in a wide sense, that is to say, as a way of life in decent conditions that make possible a fulfilling idea of society, egalitarian relations with others, and the ability to live in harmony with one's past and one's roots.

So conceived, culture is an integrating way of life that can give existence a meaning and then, and then only, can create a citizenship based on autonomous and responsible individuals.

In this respect, it is a surprising short-sightedness on the part of decision-makers both within the EU's institutions and in member states, that they insist on giving the churches a privileged role in “giving meaning” to a European citizenship still to be created, when the whole population no longer gives them any role in guiding their lives as a result of their taking positions completely at odds with today's aspirations.

SOME PROPOSALS

Sustainable Development

Reduction of social inequality, the struggle against poverty and social exclusion, preservation of the environment, rational use of natural resources – these are issues of global significance.

The idea of sustainable development reflects these issues in that it brings together social, economic and environmental concerns. Applying the idea of sustainable development within and outside the European Union will allow it to act as a driving force in the evolution of globalisation with a human face.

The European Humanist Federation considers that it is a matter of moral and social responsibility towards future generations. The humanist ideal demands that the European Union's objectives should be pursued on the basis of sustainable development that can meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs likewise. Such development holds out the prospect of an acceptable balance between the demands of the economy, the improvement of social conditions and the limits imposed by the physical environment and the consumption of natural resources.

Education, Science and Society

Education is the basis for a vibrant democracy, in which citizens cannot truly participate without a suitable education, including education in citizenship. Modern information and communications technology are in course of creating a new form of social and cultural exclusion – e-exclusion or digital divisiveness. If we want to preserve the democratic values that form the foundations of the European Union, we must give each and every citizen the means to become competent in these new technologies by means of an adequate education and guarantee them all free access to digital information published by public authorities, just as with traditional public notices.

Without this, we will not be able to count the processes of electronic consultation as instruments for democratic participation. Instead, they will constitute a basis for discrimination between those who have the relevant knowledge and access and those who have neither one nor the other.

The Union owes it to itself to pursue, in the way it has already begun, policies for international co-operation in scientific research in a way that will maintain an advanced level of knowledge. Religious considerations cannot interfere in the choice of research topics. Implementation of research results must not be allowed to lead to worsening the gap that exists with developing countries.

The European Humanist Federation demands that a distinction be drawn in its proposals between issues linked to the acquisition of knowledge, in particular scientific knowledge, and those concerning its use and application.

Towards a realistic policy on drugs

A century of prohibition has not succeeded in preventing the circulation of drugs, their trafficking by criminal gangs, their sale and consumption. On the contrary, drugs are increasingly and easily available. Rather than solve them, prohibition has actually worsened society's problems of health and security. Legal confusion and insecurity reign: it is becoming difficult to tell what is forbidden and what is allowed.

As regards the anti-drug strategy for the period 2005-2012, approved by the European Council on 17 September 2004, and the resolution of the European Parliament of 14 December 2004, the European Humanist Federation demands the implementation of:

- a strategy of information about drugs, with explanations that is as impartial as possible and from which moralising and religious messages have been eliminated along with preconceived ideas – that is to say, 'detoxed' information;
- a strategy of controlling the market for drugs – their price and quality – from production to end-consumer.

The European Humanist Federation recommends an innovatory proposal for new legislation framed on our experience of public health in relation to the trade and use of drugs.

Security and Human Rights

Since the attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, the struggle against terrorism has become one of the priorities of the whole international community and one of the major themes within international and regional organisations. This struggle has had a major impact on the balance between freedom and security.

The seriousness of some offences has provoked distortions of fundamental principles of international law and of criminal law and procedure. Exceptional judicial procedures have been put in place for the trial of individuals assumed to be terrorists. History teaches us that times of war and instability are times when it is dangerous to adopt, often in an emotional rush, novel measures that limit freedom and grant excessive powers to the State.

The European Humanist Federation is concerned that the European Union and its member states take care to respect human rights and the principles of the rule of law.

The struggle against exclusion and poverty

In the struggle against inequality between poor and rich regions, it is vital to overcome the national self-centredness that creates budgetary restraints and slows programmes of investment. Dumping, used to drag social obligations down towards the lowest levels, allows in the short term mouth-watering profits for a self-interested minority. In the long term it destroys our sense of values for the European idea in setting one people against another, distancing them from notions of cohesion and communal action.

Many European Councils have occupied themselves with the struggle against poverty and social exclusion.

The European Humanist Federation demands that all steps be taken with a view to giving concrete expression to effective national plans. These must be able to produce rapid results since it is not acceptable to be forced to observe a steady increase in poverty and exclusion when Europe is one of the most prosperous regions in the world. The European Union can and must show the way to a more equitable society for everyone.

THE EUROPEAN DREAM

The main task that European politicians must have in their sights is to create a favourable context for the promotion of progressive values. This is the focus of the current debate about the nature of the Europe we wish to construct. Is it a matter of working out a simple agreement for free exchange, providing a referee in the commercial jungle where people have little place?

Or is it a matter of constructing a more ambitious union, a truly collective project for social progress on the basis of shared humanist values?

Only a project with this ambition is capable of motivating people with sufficient energy.

Politics must again take a preponderant place over economics. Politics must be the guarantor of the general interest. It must be politics that shows the direction Europe is going and gives meaning to economics.

Control by citizens puts fear in the hearts of those who prefer to work in the dark. By contrast, actions undertaken in perfect harmony with humanist values need the light of day.

The European project, if it is to carry, must be worked out democratically. Our populations have attained a greater political maturity through education.

All the same, the distancing of citizens from the decision-making centres of the European Union is a brake on the development of a European consciousness. Strengthening of citizenship by the development of broad democratic debate across Europe is a move in the direction of Dignity, Freedom and Social Cohesion.

Europe: a place of tolerance

The Europe that is being created is a Europe of cultural, ethnic and religious diversity. It must therefore be a place of tolerance and, even better, of respect and mutual understanding.

The European Humanist Federation insists on the role that public authorities must play in this matter, particularly as regards teaching. We consider that only the priority of secular interests over religious, of the public interest over the aspirations of particular ideological groups, will be sufficient to avoid socio-cultural diversity translating itself into a juxtaposition of ghettos that are indifferent, indeed opposed, if not hostile to each other.

If the European Union wishes to be a space of liberty, security and justice, this will come about the more surely by affirming, by virtue of democratic legitimacy, the basic principle of the separation of public authorities from all private centres of power or of partisan influence of whatever nature.

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