

REPORT ON ACTIVITIES 2004 - 2005

The report on activities has been drawn up for the period going from March 2004 to March 2005. All the EHF documents are available on the EHF website on www.humanism.be

GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2004

Representatives of 19 EHF member organisations, coming from 8 European countries took part in the EHF General Assembly (GA) held in London in the building of South Place Ethical Society, on 19 and 20 June 2004.

On 19 June, Lars Gule, General Secretary of the Norwegian humanist organisation Human-Etisk Forbund, gave a lecture on "Humanism, religious freedom and toleration - new challenges in a multi-religious Europe".

It was followed by a thorough debate on the 2004-2005 working plan proposed by the EHF Board .

The GA approved the report on activities for 2003, the accounts for 2003, the budget for 2004, a provisional budget for 2005 and a working plan for 2004-2005.

It admitted as a consultative member the Spanish organisation "Europa Laica" and elected Suzy Mommaerts, Jean- Michel Ducomte and Marianne Marchand as board members for a three-year term; the other board members continuing their term.

It re-appointed T. De Groot, G. Liénard and W. Schultz to the Membership Committee for 2005. Luc Devuyt and Eric Mauquoy were re-appointed auditors for 2005.

The 20 June session was a seminar on "European Humanist Co-operation" which was devoted to the presentation of the main activities of EHF member organisation on a European level. There were in-depth exchanges on improving the co-operation between the members and with the federation in the framework of European activities.

BOARD

Composition as of 19 June 2004 :

President : Steinar NILSEN (Norway)

First Vice-President : Vera Pegna (Italy)

Vice-President : Jean-Michel Ducomte (France)

Secretary General : Georges Liénard (Belgium)

Treasurer : Suzy Mommaerts (Belgium)

Members : Tryntsje de Groot (Netherlands), Marianne Marchand (Belgium), Werner Schultz (Germany)

The EHF Board met three times for whole day meetings in June 2004 in London, in September 2004 in Brussels and in February 2005 in Paris.

In June, most of the meeting was devoted to preparing the general assembly and the activities set up by EHF during the same week-end. On 19 June, there was an election for positions in the new board that had just been elected by the GA.

Several items on the agenda of the meeting of September concerned issues of discrimination. Following the actions and activities set up previously concerning discrimination against non-believers and humanists, the Board decided to :

- collect from EHF member organisations and other groups information on discrimination in different European countries and to draw up a document to be sent to E.U. Commissioners and Parliamentarians;
- make a European study of concordats and of their content with respect to discrimination against non-Catholics.

The Board also decided to hold the next General Assembly in Berlin, on 26 June 2005, in the framework of the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the Freethinkers Organisation of Germany (which became the Humanistischer Verband Deutschlands, in 1993) and to organise jointly on 25 June, a conference on a topic related to the limits to free thought and to religious freedom.

EHF and the European humanist community/movement were to be presented to the new President of the European Commission and to European Commissioners.

At the February 2005 meeting, the Board discussed the issue of concordats in Europe, the follow-up of articles 47 and 52 of the draft European Constitutional Treaty, future meetings and events, took note of the dissolution of the Initiative "A Soul for Europe", prepared the 2005 general assembly and organised the Berlin conference on the limits of religious freedom.

ACTIVITIES

The debates on the draft Constitutional Treaty have shown a growing clericalisation and the will of the majority of the Member States to favour the intervention of the Christian Churches in decision-making processes (article 52 of the Treaty).

A great many Member States of the Union have signed concordats with the Vatican resulting in grave discriminations against non-Christians and especially against humanists and secularists.

The humanist community has to undertake actions on two levels : on the one hand on the level of the European Institutions (EHF being in charge of this) and on the other hand on the level of Member States governments (EHF member organisations dealing with it). Of course an efficient coordination is needed in order to get results.

EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS

Most of the EHF actions regarding the European Institutions have been devoted to the struggle to have Article 52 (ex 51) rejected from the draft European Constitutional Treaty, to preventing religions from interfering in European issues and in decision-making processes, to guaranteeing the respect of the principle of separation between Churches and States and between Churches and the European Union, and mostly to fighting against the many existing or future discriminations against non-believers in Europe.

Draft European Constitutional Treaty

The Draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe was unanimously adopted at the Brussels European Council of 17 and 18 June 2004 and signed in Rome on 29 October 2004.

The text has now to be ratified in each country by various procedures (referendum, parliamentary ratification, etc.).

The Constitution cannot enter into force until one year after the last national ratification.

During nearly the whole of 2004, EHF pursued its campaigning for the withdrawal of article 52 (ex 51) from the draft Constitution.

The position of the Federation and the arguments against article 52 were largely circulated by EHF and its member organisations through documents, interventions, articles in magazines and newspapers, interviews for the press, television channels and radios, lecture giving, attending seminars, conferences and congresses, letter writing to numerous authorities, members of national parliaments and of the European Parliament, presenting statements at hearings (European Parliament, ...), etc ...

A few examples :

16 March 2004 – La Louvière–Belgium

Organised by the Maison de la Laïcité de La Louvière

Conference on “ Religions et laïcité : quels valeurs et projets communs ”

Speech by Georges Liénard, EHF Secretary General

1 April 2004 – Mons (Belgium)

Organised by Info Point Europe/Province de Hainaut

Talk and debate on “Après l’élargissement : quels impacts pour la Belgique et l’Union européenne ? ”

In April 2004, EHF circulated the appeal for the withdrawal of article 51 from the European Constitution launched by Italian European MP Maurizio Turco which had also been signed by quite many European MP’s.

EHF sent and circulated in May 2004 a letter addressed to Bertie Ahern, at the time President of the European Council, asking for the withdrawal of article 51 from the draft Constitution.

9 May 2004 – Paris (France)

Organised by the CEMEA

Seminar on “ Laïcité et citoyenneté dans une Europe de la diversité ”

Speech by Georges Liénard, EHF General Secretary

15 May 2004 – Namur (Belgium)

Organised by Groupe Orval and NEW (Namur-Europe-Wallonie)

International conference on “Le projet de constitution européenne : Esprit, es-tu là ? ”

EHF Secretary General was one of the two members of the panel of the afternoon debate.

16-17 October 2004 – Luxembourg (Luxembourg)

Organised by Rencontres de Luxembourg

European Conference on “ Europe de la défense – Défense de l’Europe ”

October 2004

EHF was contacted to help an American journalist write an article about the situation of the separation of Churches and European Institutions for the 8 November issue of Newsweek.

23 November - Brussels

Interview by Joy Jouret for a TV programme.

8 December 2004

The EHF board issued and circulated a statement on the position of the Federation with regard to the draft European Constitution, considering that “time is now for debates and finally for a personal decision as independent and responsible citizens”.

17 December – Brussels

Interview for Radio Campus

18 January 2005– Brussels

Interview for Radio Suisse Romande

4 February 2005 – Brussels

Interview for an article in a Belgian humanist newspaper.

European Commission

Campaign against the nomination of Rocco Buttiglione as European Commissioner for Justice, freedom and security.

Early in October 2004, EHF and its member organisations joined a European campaign for the rejection of the candidature of Rocco Buttiglione.

EHF issued a press release opposing the nomination of European Commissioner Designate Rocco Buttiglione because of the most intolerant way in which he had talked about immigration, homosexuality and the role of women in the family.

EHF also congratulated the committee on Legal Affairs of the European Parliament for its negative vote with regard to this nomination.

EHF member organisations circulated in their country this statement to the media, to national ministers, to their European MP's, ...

Another EHF statement was released on 28 October after European Commission President Barroso decided to have the vote on commissioners postponed.

Eventually Rocco Buttiglione was not appointed European Commissioner.

Group of Policy Advisers (GOPA)

The Group reporting directly to President Prodi, had in its remit the dialogue with Churches, religions and humanist bodies, the institutional reforms and the contact with the countries candidate to the enlargement.

The GOPA used to set up briefing meetings after each Council of Ministers for the representatives of various life stances, among which EHF for the European humanist movement.

But in December 2004, EHF did not get invited to the briefing meeting but learned that the Church of Scientology had been for the first time.

EHF issued a statement “The European Commission invites the Church of Scientology and expels the humanists” which was largely circulated throughout the media and to European MP’s by humanist and friendly organisations in Europe. EHF also wrote to R. Prodi, ex-President of the Commission, and to the new president J.M.D. Barroso.

At least three written questions to the Parliament were presented by European MP’s. (two Belgians and one British)

On February 8 2005, President Barroso, on behalf of the Commission, replied that "... The Honourable Members may be correct in pointing out that on this occasion the meeting did not correspond to that ideal so, although the Constitutional Treaty is not yet in force, it is intended that during 2005 the Commission will establish procedures which match up to the spirit of the Article 52".

Discrimination

EHF was contacted early in 2004 by the Consultancy Bureau 'Net Effect' to collaborate to a study financed by the European Community action program against discrimination entitled "Study on data collection to measure the extent and impact of discrimination in Europe". EHF and some of its member organisations took part in the drafting of the questionnaire for the study.

It was a good opportunity to give visibility to the discriminations against non-believers and humanists throughout the whole of Europe and its institutions.

6-7 May 2004 – European Commission - Brussels (Belgium)

European citizens’ and stakeholders’ conference on “The 25 recommendations by the European Commission’s Expert Group on the ethical, social and legal aspects of human genetic testing in research and healthcare applications”.

EHF was represented by its member organisation Centre d’Action Laïque.

24-25 May 2004 – European Commission - Brussels (Belgium)

Conference on “ Dialogue des peuples et des cultures : les acteurs du dialogue ”

3-4 February 2005 – European Commission – Brussels (Belgium)

Consultation forum concerning the future action programme to promote active European citizenship
EHF was represented by Georges Liénard.

European Parliament

European elections

EHF drew up a memorandum in view of the European elections 2004 covering a range of subjects related to the preoccupations of humanist associations. EHF member organisations translated and adapted the EHF draft which was sent to national politicians like Prime Ministers, Ministers of Foreign and European Affairs, candidates to the European Parliament, ...

Campaign “The European Parliament finances the pope”

EHF was made aware mid-November 2004 that although the European Union does not finance any religion, the budget commission of the European Parliament had voted on the 28 October 2004, on the first lecture, the amendment 0573 that ascribed 1 500 000 euros to finance the international Christian Youth Day in Köln, in August 2005, this event being part of the pope's visit.

EHF issued a press release stressing the discriminatory character of the amendment.

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EHF co-ordinated a campaign to oppose this injustice. Member organisations and humanists alerted the media and contacted their European representatives. Some even used the procedure for submitting an individual petition to the European Parliament.

The draft budget 2005 of the European Union was voted on Thursday 16 December 2004, by the European Parliament.

The third part of Amendment 127 (ex-0573) was rejected, the majority of two thirds required for its adoption having not been reached.

Working Group “Religion and Politics”

A working group has been formed at the end of 2004, with humanist MPs and some associations having worked previously with EHF. Meetings are organised monthly in the European Parliament.

“The “*All Party Working Group on Separation of Religion and Politics*”, is an informal grouping of European parliamentarians, meeting regularly with members of civil society, with the aim of :

- Identifying issues of common interest in the field of religion/secularism and politics, primarily in the context of the European Union, but also at national and local level in Member States, when EU political values and principles are at stake;

- Taking action, where appropriate, to counter any attempts to undermine democracy, human rights and in particular women’s rights and minority rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights, pluralism and the rule of law.”

EHF has participate in the meetings, as an invited guest, and presented subjects for investigation such as subsidizing the World Youth Day during the visit of the new pope, concordats in Slovaquia and other European countries...

Committee on Constitutional Affairs of the European Parliament

EHF learned in January 2005 of a discrimination against non believers in a working document (Article 13 - PE 350.005.v 04.0) drawn up by Andrew Duff, Rapporteur at the Committee on Constitutional Affairs.

EHF member organisations and humanists all over Europe were invited to write to their national members of the European Parliament, as well as to any other person likely to intervene.

Josef Leinen, Chairman of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs, who had been informed of this in particular by Werner Schultz, member of the EHF board, had replied that he understood the arguments of EHF and that he would see to it that the discriminatory article 13 was modified.

25 November 2004 – European Parliament - Brussels

Hearing set up by the European Parliament’s Committee on Constitutional Affairs with a view to preparing a report on the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe.

EHF presented the humanist statement in the sectoral platform of communities of faith and conviction.

30 November and 1 December 2004 – European Parliament - Brussels

7th World Conference organised by ECSA (European Community Studies Association) : “The European Union and Emerging World Orders: Perceptions and Strategies”.

EHF was represented by Suzy Mommaerts.

7-8 December 2004 – European Parliament - Brussel

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Conference organised by Emma Bonino and Marco Pannella, European MP's on "Laïcité et religions dans l'Union européenne – les urgences France, Italie, Espagne".

EHF was represented by Georges Liénard and Jenoff Van Hulle.

European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)

22 June 2004- Brussels

Informal meeting by invitation of the members of the "Initiative A Soul for Europe" to propose a joint collaboration with respect to the article 47 of the draft Treaty (dialogue with civil society).

9 November 2004 – Brussels (Belgium)

Organised by EESC and the Committee on Constitutional Affairs of the European Parliament.

Session of dialogue on the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe

EHF was represented by Georges Liénard.

ACTIVITIES AND ACTIONS WITH MEMBER ORGANISATIONS

Concordats

Implementing the working plan adopted in 2004 by the General Assembly, EHF has endeavoured to study the issues of concordats with the Holy See in the European Union countries.

In coordination with the National Secular Society (NSS), a list of countries having a concordat has been drawn up. NSS has opened an internet site in order to post all documents on this issue.

EHF has convinced European MP's that the question of concordats deserves interest as some items may be in contradiction with the European Convention on Human Rights and with directives on non discrimination (see Working Group "Religion and Politics").

The group of parliamentarians decided to adopt the EHF suggestion to investigate concordats in the EU, in order to determine if some concordats are not in contravention of European rights and of freedom of conscience.

But the problem was to obtain valuable information from independent investigators and lawyers.

The case of Slovakia is particularly worrying.

An annexe to the concordat signed in 2004 deals with the «right to exercise objection of conscience»: *Objection of conscience is based on the principle of free conscience according to which anyone may refuse to act in a way ...contrary to the body of teaching of the Catholic Church.*

This Treaty would lead to import clauses of the Catholic canonical Law into the Slovak Law, without taking any account of the freedom of conscience of persons of other religions and of non believers, atheists or agnostics, notwithstanding the adhesion to the Convention on Human Rights.

20-23 May 2004 – Lyon (France)

Congress of the Ligue de l'Enseignement "Agir et décider en citoyens d'Europe"

EHF was represented by Georges Liénard who presented a talk in a workshop.

29 October 2004 – Torino (Italy)

Organised by Gruppo Giovani Atei and Circolo UAAR di Torino

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Meeting on the theme “Costituzione Europea : Quali garanzie di laicità ? Laicità alla francese, alla belga, alla vaticana ?”

EHF Vice-President Vera Pegna represented the federation and was also present as Vice-Secretary of the Unione degli Atei e degli Agnostici Razionalisti (UAAR)

6 December 2004 – Madrid (Spain)

Encuentro Laicista 2004 organised by Europa Laica

EHF was represented by Suzy Mommaerts who gave a speech on EHF, its actions and activities.

19 January 2005 – Brussels (Belgium)

Meeting between EHF Secretary General and the President of the Union Rationaliste de France, in order to improve collaboration.

ENHANCEMENT OF THE VISIBILITY OF EHF AND OF HUMANISM

It has become vital for the humanist movement to create alliances to reach its objectives when entering into the European dimension. What is at stake means that we need to reinforce our actions and to enhance the visibility of humanism on a European level .

Initiative “A Soul for Europe – Ethics and Spirituality”

It had been decided to cancel the Initiative and all activities, because of a lack of interest from the European Commission, of difficulties to obtain funding and also of a lack of interest for collaboration between members.

On February 18 2005, a last internal meeting has been organised for evaluation and future perspective between some members but without any direct conclusion.

Observatoire International de la Laïcité

It is a structure for exchange and co-operation founded by the Mouvement Europe et Laïcité, the Ligue française de l’enseignement, the Grand Orient de France and EHF. Its principal aim is to improve the circulation of information regarding humanist issues. Since its creation, the OIL has been enlarged with several organisations among which the Fédération française de la Libre Pensée, several French masonic obediences and the Portugese organisation Europa e Laicidade. The Observatoire met three times in 2004.

Most of the discussions dealt with the preparing of events celebrating the centenary of the French 1905 secular laws and the evolution of the drafting of the Constitutional Treaty.

Taking part to the Observatoire gives EHF the possibility to circulate and explain its positions, to make other participants aware of issues in preparation and to increase its network of contacts.

International Humanist and Ethical Youth Organisation (IHEYO)

23 March 2004 – Brussels (Belgium) – Meeting with Gea Meyers, President and Frederik Dezutter, Treasurer

Since IHEYO has set up an office in Belgium, links have been tightened with EHF and contacts take place on a regular basis.

International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU)

01 April 2004 – Gent (Belgium) – Meeting with Sonja Eggerickx, Vice-President of IHEU to improve the collaboration between both humanist organisations.

Collaboration with other organisations

Thinking Freely about Europe

It is a cultural club recognised by the European Commission and supported by EHF that aims at fostering, in Brussels, a network of people having close connections with the European institutions and at guaranteeing a permanent visibility for humanism among the civil servants of the European institutions and the public interested in European matters.

A lunch and debate is organised in a restaurant in Brussels once a month.
<http://users.skynet.be/penseelibre/>

9 May 2004 – Paris (France)

Organised by the CEMEA

Seminar on “ Laïcité et citoyenneté dans une Europe de la diversité ”

EHF Secretary General gave a key lecture on the theme of the seminar.

3 June 2004 – Brussels (Belgium)

Organised by the Fédération laïque de Centres de Planning familial and other organisations among which EHF.

Conference and debate on “L’influence de la droite religieuse sur les politiques internationales et européennes en matière de sexualité et d’avortement”

10 August 2004 - Brussels

Meeting with independent Christian organisations, gay and lesbian groups and women’s associations to organise an anti-discrimination program in the European Union.

8 October 2004 – Namur (Belgium)

Organised by Conseil Provincial de Namur, Oracle and NEW

Conference on “Le financement des cultes et de la laïcité : comparaison internationale et perspectives ”

Georges Liénard presented a lecture.

14-26 October 2004 – Belgium

Organised by FARE – Football Against Racism in Europe

Circulation of information and posters for the action week against racism and discrimination in European football.

25 October – 6 December 2004 – Brussels (Belgium)

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Organised by Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis

Plurireligious seminar “Les religions face à leurs fondamentalismes et intégrismes ”

Georges Liénard attended all the sessions of the seminar and gave a key lecture with regard to humanism on 8 November.

6-7 December 2004- Amsterdam (The Netherlands)

Conference set up by Images of Science on “New Interactions between Science and Society”.

Suzy Mommaerts attended the workshops: “Religion and science in the 21th century” and “Playing God: different philosophical positions with regard to makeability”.

16 December – Brussels (Belgium)

Organised by the Centre Démocrate Humaniste (French-speaking Belgian catholic political party)

Conference on “L’Etat et le culte : un couple maudit”

Georges Liénard presented a lecture on “laïcité”.

15 February – 28 April 2005 – Brussels

Organised by the Institute for European Studies of the Vrij Universiteit of Brussels.

The series of 9 lectures on Multiculturalism in the European Union at the Institute for European Studies addressed one of the most topical and pressing subjects of the day, namely about the social effects of migration on the countries of the European Union. Emphasis was put on the concept of 'multiculturalism' and its suitability in the current situation: Should we reconsider this concept? Why? And what will we put in the place of it?

Publication

Video film “2500 years (and more) of Free Thinking”

The film was produced by three Belgian organisations, Centre d’Action Laïque, Unie Vrijzinnige Verenigingen and the Centre Laïque Audiovisuel, with the support of EHF, in French and Dutch. It has been translated into four other languages (German, Spanish, Italian and English) thanks to a subsidy from the European Commission.

EHF member organisations gave it a very good reviewing in their publications. It has sold quite well and is still available in VHS from the EHF office for 12 euro a copy (– 25 % reduction for 5 or more copies) or on DVD for 15 euro (postage included).

“Humanism and democracy in Central Europe : Coexistence of different life stances”

The French version of the proceedings (in English in 2003) of the conference organised in Warsaw, in 2002, by EHF and the Polish Humanist Federation have been published with the financial support of the European Commission.

Available from the EHF office in Brussels.

Communication

Egroups

EHF moderates two egroups : one for the member organisations only that deals mainly with administrative matters and internal discussions. The second one which has now quite a few members is used to circulate information, debate on particular issues and launch actions concerning humanist and European topics.

Web site www.humanism.be

Due to a staff shortage from October 2004, the EHF web site has not been developed and updated as it had been expected. The situation is due to be improved in Spring 2005.

Information

EHF regularly receives numerous requests for information on a wide range of subjects, from anything concerning humanism, the European Union and its institutions, humanist organisations to euthanasia or weddings ...

CONCLUSION

Defence of secularism and humanism is the main thread in the working plan for 2004-2005 adopted by the 2004 GA, in which three major priorities have been defined : European Institutions, development of synergies for action with the members and IHEU and enhancement of EHF visibility and capacity for action.

2004 was quite an important year for Europe with the enlargement of the Union to 25 Member States, with the election of a new European Parliament and the nomination of a new Commission in November 2004.