

## **EHF REPORT ON ACTIVITY 2007/08**

This report covers the period from March 2007 to March 2008

### **Introduction**

The Working Plan adopted by the EHF General Assembly on 15 June 2007 in Torino was divided into three main areas of work: external campaigning work, internal work, and promoting the visibility of Humanism and Secularism in Europe. This provides the basic framework of this report with the addition of a section on internal management.

### **1. External Campaigning Work**

The plan, which saw our campaigning work as concentrated on the European institutions but also including work at the national level, has been very substantially fulfilled.

#### ***(a) European Union***

##### **Berlin Declaration**

2007 was the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome. As reported last year, we marked this in two ways: by co-sponsoring with IHEU and others the Brussels Declaration in support of liberal values in society and by publishing our own booklet *The European Dream*. This booklet was presented at a press conference chaired by P. Busquin, a former European commissioner and now Belgian EP. We also helped make it impossible for Angela Merkel as Council President to include in her Berlin Declaration any reference to Europe's alleged Christian values.

##### **Protests at Article 52/Article 16C**

In a final shot in our campaign against special consultation rights for the churches and other religious organisations we wrote to the Presidents of the EU Council, Parliament and Commission in May, but to no avail: what was Article 52 of the draft Constitution became, under the Lisbon Treaty, Article 16C of the Maastricht Treaty.

##### **EHF Policy on Article 16C**

The Board discussed the policy EHF should adopt in this new situation and agreed that, rather than leave the field open to the churches and other religions, we should as a defensive measure take up our right as a 'philosophical and non-confessional' organisation to the same rights. We also agreed that it would be contrary to our long stand against special rights of consultation and also contrary to the valuable bar on discrimination based on religious or non-religious beliefs in the European Convention of Human Rights (Articles 9 and 14) that we should have separate consultations: instead we should seek to join the churches in their meetings - with the advantage that we could deliver 'instant refutations' of unjustified religious demands.

##### **Correspondence with President Barroso**

Already in February we had written to President Barroso about his reference in a speech to the

European Parliament in Strasbourg on 13 February to Europe's "cultural and religious pluralism", pointing out that a reference to religious pluralism ignored the huge population of non-believers and asking to be included in the planned meeting in May between religious leaders and the Presidents of the Council, Parliament and Commission. His reply did not address our request and the meeting with "20 leading representatives of the Christian, Jewish and Islamic faiths in Europe" went ahead without us.

#### Meeting with President Barroso

In July we had our second meeting with President Barroso - the first was in November 2005 - and took up the same point about being included in such meetings with religious leaders, to no avail. We also asked for EU attention to the deteriorating human rights situation in Poland (now somewhat mended after a change of government later in the year) and made a point about the method of appointing teachers of non-religious moral education in EU Commission schools. The meeting was cordial and Mr Barroso told us that the EU would support and he would wish to address an EHF colloquium which is now due to take place in April 2008.

#### Further correspondence with President Barroso

Alarmed by expansive plans by COMECE for even closer consultation with the EU - for example, on forthcoming legislation - we wrote to President Barroso again in January 2008 reiterating our case for being included in the same meetings as religious leaders and asking in the interest of transparency for such meetings to be better reported. His friendly reply ignored both points.

#### BEPA (Bureau of European Policy Advisors)

We have established a good working relationship with BEPA, particularly in the planning of the colloquium arranged for 16 April 2008 to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and we were successful with a protest to them about the biased language of the EU website on dialogue with the churches: the relevant page was immediately withdrawn and is to be rewritten.

#### Fundamental Rights Agency

We responded to an invitation to take part in December in a consultative meeting with civil society organised by the new European Union Fundamental Rights Agency. "How can civil society best contribute to FRA's policy development activities? How can FRA and civil society cooperate in promoting dialogue and awareness raising?" was the subject of the meeting. Georges Liénard presented EHF's position based on an equal treatment for all convictions.

#### EU Policy Consultations

In October we responded to an EU consultation on Schools for the 21st Century. In March we responded to an EU consultation on restricting subsidies for public service broadcasters.

## Year of Intercultural Dialogue

We were disappointed that the funding arrangements for the EU Year of Intercultural Dialogue were in the event such as to make it impossible for the EHF to obtain a grant so as to participate.

### **(b) European Parliament**

#### Working Group on Separation of Religion and Politics

We continued to take an active part in meetings of the Working Group on Separation of Religion and Politics and were represented at all its meetings during the year. Having already in April written to Hans Gert Pottinger, President of the Parliament, about his invitation to the Pope to address the Parliament, we took up the issue again with him when he addressed the Working Group in July.

#### Invitations to Religious Leaders

Later in the year it emerged that he had invited several other religious leaders to address the Parliament and the Working Group raised protests at the list being entirely male and entirely religious. After a Polish MEP had urged the Socialist Group of MEPs that the EHF should also be invited, we emailed members of that group on the issue.

#### Other Work in the Parliament

In November we supported a petition to the European Parliament against illiberal treatment of immigrants. In January, we took part in a roundtable discussion in the European Parliament on how EU co-operates with the OSCE and the USA on addressing freedom of religion and belief issues.

### **(c) Council of Europe**

#### Church and State report

Following the February 2007 colloquy on church and state called by the Committee on Culture, Science and Education of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) to which we contributed, the Committee published in June a very satisfactory report on the issue.

#### Correspondence with the President of PACE

In April we protested to the President of PACE at his suggestion that the churches should have a special status with the Council of Europe and his invitation to the Pope to address the Parliamentary Assembly.

#### “3Is Colloquium”

EHF co-sponsored the International Intercultural Interconvictional colloquium on the theme “Social cohesion in a multicultural Europe: role and impact of currents of thought and religions”, plans for which were reported last year. This took place

on October 3 and 4 in Strasbourg and our co-sponsors included the Council of International NGOs of the Council of Europe, IHEU, the Ligue Internationale de l'Enseignement, our member organisation the Cercle Gaston Crémieux, Manifeste des Libertés and the Réseau Européen Eglises et Libertés. Georges Liénard took part to the organising committee. The colloquy was recognised by the Council of Europe as part of their project on Social Cohesion in a Multi-Cultural Europe. The report of this colloquium is available on [http://www.coe.int/t/f/ong/public/Actes\\_colloque\\_3I.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/f/ong/public/Actes_colloque_3I.pdf)

#### Meeting on Teaching of Religion and Non-Religious Beliefs

More recently we were pleased to be asked to contribute to an invitation-only Council of Europe meeting in April, 8 2008 on teaching about religion and non-religious beliefs. Georges Liénard presented its position on the necessity to include all convictions in teaching about "religious facts and believes". Andrew Copson presented two case studies from England as examples of good practice.

#### ***(d) Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe***

##### Ministerial Conference in Bucharest

Our representative Vera Pegna continued to be active on our behalf. She submitted recommendations and intervened in the plenary session at a meeting in Bucharest of the OSCE Ministerial Conference on Combatting Discrimination, Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding.

##### ODIHR Human Dimension Implementation Meeting: Warsaw

Vera Pegna and David Pollock attended the OSCE Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights annual meeting of states and NGOs in Warsaw on democracy and human rights. We intervened in plenary sessions and held a successful side-meeting. We lobbied several of the delegates from member states.

##### Written recommendations to other conferences

We submitted a recommendation to a conference on Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims in Cordoba in October and to the Mediterranean Seminar on promoting tolerance and non-discrimination in December.

##### Correspondence with ODIHR Director

We also wrote to the Director of the OSCE Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights about the need for equal recognition and treatment of non-religious people. His friendly reply agreed to the principle but did not respond to our practical recommendations.

### ***(e) Work at the National Level and Other Campaigning Work***

During the year we sent letters on the issues indicated to the President of Poland (persecution of homosexuals etc), the President of Pakistan (house arrest of Asma Jahangir), the Prime Minister of Lithuania (restrictions on abortion), the Prime Minister of India (detention of Taslima Nasreen), the Minister of Education in Romania (removal of evolution from the school curriculum), and the Minister of Education of Bulgaria (religious education).

We also took part in a meeting in Berlin in December of the new organisation Focus on Freedom of Religion or Belief. Meeting was entitled "Freedom of religion and Belief in a global perspective, challenges and opportunities"

Since last year, EHF had maintained closed co-operation with "Centre interdisciplinaire d'études des religions et de la laïcité" from Brussels free university. EHF is regularly invited and took part in debates and meetings. EHF took part to an international symposium on secularism in Europe.

## **2. Internal Work**

### ***(a) Meetings and Communication***

We held a workshop in Torino on the morning of 15 June, to debate with member organisations the meaning of state neutrality and of secularism in the EU and to discuss the draft EHF working plan for 2008 in advance of the General Assembly.

On 16 June we held a one-day colloquium, jointly with Consultà Torinese, the UAAR, IHEU and European Humanist Professionals, on the topic: "Secularism, civil rights and neutrality of public institutions: comparison of experiences in an intercultural Europe". The joint sponsors were pleased to be received in an official reception in Torino City Hall.

We also held a joint informal dinner on 16 June.

We have continued to develop our contacts with IHEU and were pleased to link our two general assemblies in Torino, something we hope to repeat in 2009. Rob Buitenweg, as IHEU Vice-President and EHF First Vice-President, is charged with maintaining close contact between the two organisations and a meeting between representative board members is planned.

Likewise we continue to foster relations with European Humanist Professionals and with the International Humanist and Ethical Youth Organisation (IHEYO).

We have made considerably greater use of the Info e-forum and the e-forum for Member Organisations to distribute information about our work, with reports on meetings attended and on our correspondence with EU officials, governments etc.

### ***(b) Policy and research***

Working group on education, we are also paying attention to education, a very broad subject. We responded, as noted above, to an EU consultation on schools; we welcomed the OSCE

Toledo guidelines on teaching about religious and non-religious beliefs in public schools; we are drafting a basic statement on the aims of education and we have a examining several aspects of education practice and policy.

We continued to develop our database of information on relations between state and church in European countries and member organisations contributed additional information. This was made available on the Info e-forum and will be included in the new website.

We have worked on development of policy, producing statements on marriage law and on preserving human rights while combatting terrorism. An appeal has been issued to members for information about governments contracting out public services to religious organisations.

### **3. Promoting the Visibility of Humanism and Secularism in Europe**

We have been working hard on developing a new website which we hope will be available by the time of the 2008 General Assembly. We have continued to distribute our publications, including in particular *The European Dream*.

Our monthly lunch-debates, organised under the title “Thinking freely about Europe”, continued through the year. This 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.

*Klingberg colloquium on "a secular Europe, the road to European citizenship through education"*

In November, Suzy Mommaerts and Luc Devuyst, two members of EHF education group, took part to a two days colloquium organised by DFW at Klingberg (Germany). Georges Liénard presented a talk “How to shape the road to European Citizenship”

EHF continues to respond to requests for information on a wide range of subjects, particularly from students doing research on the relations between State/EU and religions and on the positions taken by non-believers.

In addition, of course, our campaigning work has improved our visibility, especially among staff of European institutions such as OSCE and the Fundamental Rights Agency and with other NGOs that share common interests - not to speak of those who oppose us!

### **4. Management of EHF**

*(a) General assembly 2007*

The 2007 General Assembly was hosted by the Consulta Torinese per la Laicità delle Istituzioni in Torino, Italy, on 15 June. The GA accepted two new member organisations: the

RIBZ (Raad voor Inspectie en Begeleiding niet-confessionele Zedenleer) from Belgium and the Cercle Gaston-Crémieux from France.

*(b) Board of directors*

The Board of Directors met six times :

on 31 March 2007, in Brussels, hosted by the Centre d'Action Laïque

on 14 and 17 June, in Torino 2007 hosted by Consulta Torinese

on 5 October 2006, in Strasbourg

on 19 January 2008, in Brussels, hosted by the Centre d'Action Laïque

on 1 March 2008, in Brussels, hosted by the Centre d'Action Laïque

The current composition of the Board is as follows:

President: David Pollock (United Kingdom)

First Vice-President: Rob Buitenweg (Netherlands)

Second Vice-President: Julien Houben (Italy)

Secretary General: Georges Liénard (Belgium)

Treasurer: Suzy Mommaerts (Belgium)

Members: Tryntsje de Groot (Netherlands), Andrew Copson (United Kingdom), Luc Devuyst (Belgium), Marianne Marchand (Belgium), Werner Schultz (Germany), Baard Thalberg (Norway)

*(c) Increasing our Financial Resources*

Our plan required us to seek to increase our financial and other resources. We have as proposed examined our structure and level of membership fees. We have done so and concluded for the present that our member organisations are so various that no alternative is possible to our present rule that offers a number of levels of payment from which member organisations can choose. We are, however, proposing an intermediate new subscription level of €2,000.

In February the President wrote to member organisations asking them to increase their level of subscription. Some of them have agreed; many at the time of writing have not replied.

We have, however, received an anonymous donation of €7,500, for which we are extremely grateful.