

**DRAFT**

**EUROPEAN HUMANIST FEDERATION**

**GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2009**

**REPORT ON ACTIVITY 2008/09**

*This report covers the period from March 2008 to March 2009*

**Introduction**

This has been a transitional year: after the General Assembly in May Georges Liénard announced his resignation as general secretary (though he has continued in an acting capacity), and for most of the year we have had no assistance from the staff of the Centre d'Action Laïque and of Unie Vrijzinnige Verenigingen who had in previous years provided such valuable help: Edith Nagant has sadly been on extended sick leave and Jenoff van Hulle has been redeployed to other work. Their valuable work has been much missed.

Nevertheless, we have continued our activities with some vigour, as this report shows. And we noted with interest that a Eurobarometer survey in December 2008 showed that only 7% of Europeans place religion in their 'top three' values from a list of 12 - it comes last after peace, human rights, respect for human life, democracy, rule of law, individual freedom, equality, tolerance, solidarity & support for others, self-fulfilment and respect for other cultures. Sadly, governments and the EU give it much greater prominence.

The Working Plan adopted by the EHF General Assembly on 16 May 2008 in Athens 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***

**Article 17**

The Lisbon Treaty will if ratified introduce into the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union a new Article 17 requiring 'open, transparent and regular dialogue' with the churches and with 'philosophical and non-confessional organisations'. This is the same Article as has variously been known as Article 37, 51, 52, 15B and 16C during the debates on a European constitution and on the Lisbon Treaty.

In line with the policy reported in our report for 2007-08, we renewed our request to President Barroso be included in the meeting in May between the presidents of the European Council, Commission and Parliament. Our request to be included in 2007 had been ignored, as had a request in a letter of January 2008.

Having found that the topics for discussion in May 2009 were to be climate change and reconciliation through intercultural dialogue, we pointed out that neither was a “matter of exclusively religious interest: indeed, they are topics of major importance to all people in Europe and elsewhere. Interfaith dialogue might arguably be confined to the religious, but culture is something we all share. Humanists no less than Christians, Muslims, Buddhists or others have deep moral convictions and a coherent and compelling set of beliefs about the nature of life and the world.”

This new request was brushed off and the meeting went ahead without us but with thirteen Roman Catholic, Anglican, Protestant and Orthodox bishops, four Muslim imams and four Jewish rabbis.

In July the EU Commission webpages dealing with dialogue with the churches and non-confessional organisations were reinstated: they had been removed in February 2008 following our objections to their bias as reported in our report for 2007-08. The new text was suitably neutral, but later the list of 74 organisations who were recognised partners for dialogue was removed from the BEPA website. Veronique de Keyser MEP asked questions about this in the European Parliament and we wrote twice to BEPA in January 2009 - to no avail - saying that suppression of the list was incompatible with the Treaty requirement that the dialogue be 'open and transparent'.

#### Protests at Bias towards Religion

We take up routinely instances where the non-religious are ignored and where ethical concerns are assumed to be the monopoly of religion. This year we had to write even to the EU directorate responsible for equal opportunities to object that its “European handbook on equality data” repeatedly referred to “religion” where it should have used the inclusive term “religion or belief”. We said: “It would seem that the authors regard ‘belief’ merely as a tautologous repetition of ‘religion’ and so drop it for the sake of brevity!”

In November we wrote to Mr Luc Van den Brande, the President of the EU Committee of the Regions, concerning a forthcoming forum on “Intercultural dialogue at the heart of Europe's cities and regions” to express our dismay that its programme ignored the contribution of non-religious lifestyles and beliefs. We wrote: “We regard as false and dangerous the idea that religion has a unique contribution to make to ‘integration policies’ and ‘social and cultural cohesion’. Viewing such policies within an exclusively religious framework yields a distorted and biased impression and risks alienating not only the large proportion of the population who

are not religious but also the many who do not wish their religious beliefs to predominate in social policy.”

In November and December we wrote twice to Nicholas Sarkozy as current president of the European Council. Our first letter protested at the Presidency meeting representatives of the churches to discuss a wide range of matters relevant to the European Union: we asked for our own meeting. Our second letter added protests at an extraordinary conference called by the French Presidency at which delegations from member states were required to include one rabbi, one imam and one priest with a view to fostering EU dialogue with the “three principal religions”. We wrote that “neutrality, secularism or *laïcité* is the only basis on which the Union can serve all its people without unfair discrimination” and asked President Sarkozy at a suitable opportunity “to reaffirm in strong terms the neutrality of the Union with respect to religion and belief”.

Neither letter was even acknowledged. At our suggestion, however, several member organisations wrote in similar terms.

We mentioned these French initiatives in a letter to BEPA (the advisors to the Commission President) as well as our exclusion from the May dialogue and what seemed an excessive engagement by the Commission with a large evangelical rally in Brussels over the new year - President Barroso and two other Commissioners were involved. We asked what mechanisms the EU had adopted to regulate its contacts with representatives of religious and non-confessional lifestyles so as to ensure that a balance was maintained, “particularly” (we said) “in the face of the announced opinion of the Roman Catholic bishops . . . that the considerable privileges they already have in the EU ‘are indeed necessary but . . . are . . . not enough to satisfy the offer of an open, transparent and regular dialogue’.” We said that though the churches had lost membership on a massive scale over recent decades they retained huge and authoritarian institutional power and that any privileged dialogue with them - even with our nominal inclusion - was bound “to result in the EU in effect bolstering their position, lending them significance they do not justify, and (most importantly) impairing its own legitimacy in the eyes of that significant proportion of the population of Europe who have rejected religious belief.”

The reply to this letter disowned responsibility for the French initiatives and sought to justify the Commission’s activities as showing no bias and lending no support to religion.

#### Support from the European Commission

Our relations with the BEPA are nevertheless cordial, and we were extremely grateful to them for providing premises and interpretation free of charge for our conference in April 2008 to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (reported below). We are now in discussion with them about the possibility of support for a proposed conference

on children's rights.

Georges Liénard represented us at a debriefing for NGOs in January.

In November, EHF President David Pollock was an invited speaker at an EU conference on "Intercultural dialogue: a challenge for faiths and convictions?" in the Berlaymont building in Brussels. He sought to define the limits to the legitimate place of religion in the public sphere.

#### Draft Directive on Non-Discrimination

The Commission has published its draft directive to extend the ban on discrimination based on religion or belief (and the other regular 'strands') from employment to the provision of goods, facilities and services. In November we wrote to Commissioner Vladimir Spidla on the proposal, copying our memorandum widely, including to the chair of the relevant committee in the European Parliament, Lissy Groener MEP. In our comments we observed that unfair discrimination by religious institutions was widespread across Europe and said that we feared that the directive would have exceptions from the general ban for religious reasons, thus institutionalising discrimination contrary to the interest of non-religious people. We were particularly concerned that as a result of Declaration 11 of the Amsterdam Treaty the Commission might be bound to allow member states to provide wide exemptions for religious bodies: if so, it would be better that the Directive should exclude religious discrimination altogether. Commissioner Spidla's reply sought to reassure us that the draft directive struck the right balance.

#### Human Rights

We continued our contacts with the EU Fundamental Rights Agency, where Rob Buitenweg is now our representative. Marianne Marchand represented us at an FRA conference in Paris on 8-9 December 2008 on Freedom of Expression.

On Human Rights Day in December we circulated to member organisations extracts from relevant religion or belief cases at the European Court of Human Rights.

We share with IHEU and most human rights organisations a grave concern about developments in the UN Human Rights Council. In April after the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Speech was amended at the behest of Islamic states to oblige him in future "to report on instances in which the abuse of the right of freedom of expression constitutes an act of racial or religious discrimination" we wrote to President Barroso to ask whether the European Union would consult with member states and allies with a view to withdrawing from the Human Rights Council until reforms could be agreed. He replied that the EU had decided to continue working with the Council in order to try to improve its functioning.

In May we sent a substantial submission to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights who

had invited views on resolutions of the General Assembly and of Human Rights Council that proposed that so-called “defamation of religion” should be regarded as a breach of human rights. We argued forcefully for rejection of the proposal while accepting that protecting citizens from hate speech was a legitimate role for a national government. We copied this submission widely, including to the President of the EU Commission.

We wrote to President Barroso again in March 2009 about a new and even more objectionable draft resolution to the Human Rights Council from Pakistan and other Islamic states about defamation of religion. We urged that the EU use the occasion “to mark a new, vigorous and outspoken stand against Islamist subversion of human rights” and we appealed to member organisations to write to their governments.

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

We have continued our cooperation with the Working Group on Separation of Religion and Politics. David Pollock and Georges Liénard were at the meeting on March 25 2008, when the speaker was BEPA’s Jorge César das Neves and David Pollock took the opportunity to protest at EHF’s exclusion from the major consultations in May between religious leaders and the three EU presidents. Georges Liénard was at the meeting on 28 May when the subject was EU foreign policy, and he, Rob Buitenweg and David Pollock contributed to the meeting on 15 October on religion and education.

Georges Liénard represented EHF at a colloquium in the European Parliament on fundamentalist violence, secularism and religion organised by the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) on 27 August.

David Pollock was a platform speaker at a conference in the Parliament on 3 March 2009 organised by Veronique de Keyser MEP on Secularism and the EU. He spoke on Secularism, Non-Discrimination and Human Rights, urging secularism as the best guarantee of freedom of religion or belief and giving examples of unwarranted by and in favour of religion and of interference by the churches in secular matters.

Also that month we sent a copy of our submission to the EU competition commissioner on subsidies to public service broadcasting (reported last year) to the European Parliament committee on Culture and Education. We are extremely concerned that the application of strict competition rules in this sector could result in a cultural impoverishment of European life

Again in March 2009 we wrote to the Parliament’s president, Hand Gert Pottering, about a resolution the Parliament adopted in January that referred to the importance of dialogue with churches and religious communities without any mention of “philosophical and non-confessional organisations”, asking him for an “assurance that you will seek to ensure that such – probably unthinking – discrimination against the non-religious is not demonstrated in

future by the European Parliament”.

With the Parliamentary elections due in June 2009 we circulated to member organisations a memorandum (in June 2008, revised version in October) designed for submission to parties to influence their manifestos. We later prepared questions for individual supporters and members of member organisations to put to their local candidates for the election, concentrating on the need for the EU to give equal recognition and treatment under Article 17 to the non-religious as to the religious.

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

Humanism is represented at the Council of Europe by the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) and for years they have appointed Georges Liénard as one of their representatives. Under our revised agreement with IHEU (see below) the arrangement that EHF should nominate someone to IHEU for this role was formalised, and in January 2009 in view of Georges’s impending retirement we nominated and IHEU appointed Andrew Copson.

During the year Georges Liénard therefore attended meetings of accredited NGOs in parallel with the sessions of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and we were pleased that, responding to lobbying in which we played a part, the Assembly in April 2008 called on member states to decriminalize abortion, within reasonable gestational limits, if they have not already done so, and to guarantee women's' "right to access to a safe and legal abortion"

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

Vera Pegna has continued her valuable work as our representative with OSCE, not only at meetings but maintaining contacts with key staff.

#### ODIHR Human Dimension Implementation Meeting: Warsaw

Vera Pegna and David Pollock attended the OSCE Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights annual meeting in Warsaw of states and NGOs to review issues of democracy and human rights. They were joined by Adam Cioch of the Polish Freethinkers. All three made effective interventions in plenary sessions. EHF held a successful side-meeting at which David Pollock spoke on Religion in the Public Square, critiquing a recent speech by the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Bertone.

We also submitted a recommendation expressing concern at “the growing tendency to identify people on the basis of their religion” as it gave “too much importance to religion or belief, a factor that for most people is not highly significant in their self-identity”, gave “undue power” to unelected religious leaders, tended to a “recognition of so-called group rights, which are an inherent denial of full human rights to individuals within those artificially designated religious groups” and led to discrimination “against people with non-religious beliefs or no religious

beliefs”.

### Mediterranean Conference: Amman

Vera Pegna was also at the OSCE Mediterranean Conference in October 2008, taking a full part in the work of the NGOs that attended. Her intervention in the plenary session dealt with the Israel/Palestine conflict from a humanist perspective, which, backed up by an EHF written recommendation, drew sharp attention to the need to implement as well as talk about human rights and rule of law.

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

We wrote a letter at the request of Sidmennt (our member organisation in Iceland) addressed to the members of the Icelandic parliament supporting Sidmennt’s claim to be treated equally with the churches as an organisation representing a religion or belief. At present taxpayers can assign part of their income tax to their church but humanists cannot assign it to Sidmennt. Legal proceedings have so far failed to secure justice.

Having protested to President of Afghanistan in February 2008 over the death sentence passed on a young journalist, Parwiz Kambakhsh, for blasphemy (he had downloaded an article from the Internet referring to verses of the Quran supporting women’s rights), we wrote again in March 2009 when a commuted sentence of 20 years in prison was confirmed, asking the President to exercise clemency.

We also wrote to thank President Barack Obama of the USA for his unprecedented inclusive language about non-religious people in his inaugural address and at a National Prayer Breakfast when he referred to the importance of the Golden Rule, observing that it was shared by humanists and the followers of at least the great majority of religions and philosophies.

## **2. Internal Work**

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

We held a half-day meeting in Athens on 15 May 2008 before our General Assembly at which Vera Pegna spoke on our work in the OSCE, Georges Liénard on work at the Council of Europe and David Pollock on work with the EU and the European Parliament. These presentations are available on our website.

The following day we held an open conference on human rights, with excellent papers and good discussion but a regrettably small audience. David Pollock spoke on Humanism and Human Rights; Panayote Dimitras (of the Greek Helsinki Monitor) on Greece, a religious state (reporting on cases he had taken to the European Court of Human Rights); Werner Schultz spoke on the new EHF policy on preserving Human Rights while Combating Terrorism and Baard Thalberg on the new EHF policy on Marriage Laws. Vera Pegna read a paper by Keith

Porteous-Wood on the situation in the UN Human Rights Council; Andrew Copson spoke on Using Human Rights Laws, drawing on the English Experience, and Kristin Mile of the Norwegian Humanist Association talked about the European Court of Human Rights judgement in Folgero vs. Norway. All these papers are available on our website.

The General Assembly was followed by a conference dinner.

We have continued to use our Yahoo groups - ehffhe-info for supporters and the ehffhemo for Member Organisations - to distribute information about our work, with administrative matters and reports of board meetings on the member organisations' forum and reports on activities and correspondence on the Info forum, although the latter are increasingly posted to the website. The Info group also provides a forum for supporters to discuss topics of interest.

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

Our main policy focus during the year has been on education. Our working party, led by Tryntsje de Groot, met several times and was invited by our German member organisation Dachverband Freier Weltanschauungsgemeinschaften (DFW) to a weekend conference at Klingberg, near Scharbeutz, to exchange information and views: we heard from speakers from England, Germany (Berlin), Belgium and the Netherlands about the organisation of religious and humanist education in their countries, as further reported below.

Benefiting from the studies of the working party and from work done in the OSCE (the 'Toledo guidelines') and in member organisations, notably the British Humanist Association, we were able to adopt a policy (published on our website) that sets out the basic, liberal principles both regarding education in general and as it relates to religion or belief.

We continue, however, to work on the practical implications of the policy, which is far more difficult, given the immense variation in history, attitudes and cultural assumptions and administrative arrangements found in Europe. We are now preparing a resource of more practical information which we plan to put on the website: this will call for the cooperation of our member organisations in providing information - for example, about their own local arrangements.

A few additions have been made to our database of information on relations between state and church in European countries but this has not been a priority this year.

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

### ***(a) Conference on Human Rights***

To mark the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights we held a one-day conference on April 16 2008 in Brussels. This was supported by the European Commission, who provided both premises and translation, and the Commission president, José Manuel

Barroso, addressed the conference. The audience of over 200 heard a programme of distinguished speakers and took part in discussion sessions. The proceedings have been edited for us by Michel Vanden Abeele and published on our behalf by the Centre d'Action Laïque.

### ***(b) Website***

Our new website was provisionally launched in September, although additions and improvements continued to be made. By March 2009 the complete historical record (so far as it was available) had been uploaded. The site has a new URL, [www.humanistfederation.eu](http://www.humanistfederation.eu), and is in English only at present, though we hope to produce a French version in future, for which the URL [www.federationhumaniste.eu](http://www.federationhumaniste.eu) has been obtained but at present links to the old French site. We had valuable technical support in creating the site from Michel Bernair at the Centre d'Action Laïque. We now have plans for a redesign of the site and for further extension of the material (already very considerable) available on it.

### ***(c) Publications***

We have continued to distribute our publications, including in particular the proceedings of our conference on human rights (above).

### ***(d) Meetings***

The 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.

Vera Pegna represented EHF at a conference organised by Protagoras and the Soros Foundation's Open Society Institute in June in Zagreb, Croatia on Secularism and Religious Pluralism As A Prerequisite for Democracy. She detected a profound political and cultural isolation and provided information on basic human rights instruments and on the working of European organisations.

David Pollock represented us at a further meeting in Geneva in June of the high-level organisation Focus on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Georges Liénard represented us at a conference in Paris in September organised by the IPPF (International Planned Parenthood Federation) on "The Right to Abortion: What is at stake for women in Europe?" and delivered a paper entitled Some Reflections on Abortion and Ethics.

Georges Liénard spoke on behalf of EHF at another meeting in Paris in September. This meeting, organised by Libre Pensée Française in reaction to the visit of the Pope to France,

attracted an audience of 700 or more and was on the theme of the need for a secular Europe.

In November, the majority of the EHF board (Andrew Copson, Luc Devuyst, Tryntsje de Groot, Suzy Mommaerts, David Pollock, Werner Schultz) took part to a two-day colloquium organised by DFW at Klingberg (Germany) at which we addressed questions about the treatment of life stance education in schools. Papers were presented by Andrew Copson, Tryntsje de Groot and Werner Schultz.

Georges Liénard represented us at a conference on religion in education held in December at the European Parliament. This was organised by a multi-national consortium based at Hamburg University called REDCo (Religion in Education: a contribution to Dialogue or a factor of Conflict in transforming societies of European Countries).

Staffan Gunnarson and Suzy Mommaerts represented EHF at a conference held in Krakow, Poland in December entitled “21st Century – Era of Faith or Reason?”

We have also on the initiative of Luc Devuyst adopted the habit of issuing a press release after each of our regular board meetings.

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

##### ***(a) General assembly 2008***

The 2008 General Assembly was held in Athens on 15 May. Difficulties over its organisation - done mainly from London and Brussels with valuable assistance from Kyvelie Pappas - combined with its comparatively high cost and the rival attraction of the IHEU Congress in Washington meant that attendance was lower than usual, to the extent that the Assembly had to be reconvened in Brussels on 10 July to approve revisions of our bylaws, later ratified by the Belgian authorities.

##### ***(b) Board of directors***

The Board of Directors met five times :

on 15 and 18 May 2008, in Athens

on 28 September 2008, in London, hosted by the British Humanist Association

on 31 January 2009, in Brussels, hosted by the Centre d’Action Laïque

on 21 March 2009, in Brussels, hosted by Unie Vrijzinnige Verenigingen

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)

Acting Secretary General: Georges Liénard (Belgium)

Treasurer: Suzy Mommaerts (Belgium)

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

### ***(c) Agreement with IHEU***

As mentioned above, we have revised and renewed our 2003 agreement with IHEU on relations between the two organisations, again affirming that we envisage that EHF, while maintaining its identity, may become in due course a regional section of IHEU, as provided for under its bylaws. The agreement provides for exchange of minutes and other information and will, we hope, lead to closer cooperation between the organisations.

### ***(c) Finance***

Our approaches to member organisations asking them to increase the level of their subscriptions produced some results for which we are grateful but the organisation remains desperately underfunded, to the extent that Board Members have to pay their own expenses incurred in attending board meetings (only some of them are able to claim from the member organisations that nominated them).

There is some scope for applying for grants for specific work, but we do not at present have the resources even to complete the (invariably complex) applications required, and such grants usually do not contribute to the core costs of the organisation.

We were therefore delighted and extremely grateful when Human-Etisk Forbund (the Norwegian Humanist Association) paid the remaining balance of the loan we had from IHEU many years ago a total of €3,000.

However, owing to a reduced level of activity resulting from the lack of office staff (as noted at the opening of this report) we were able to end the year with a surplus of income over expenditure of nearly €8,500 and a bank balance of over €30,000.

### ***(d) Membership***

We ended the year with 32 member organisations of which 25 were full members and 7 consultative. We are aware of many other organisations in Europe that are eligible for membership, and one of the priority tasks when we again have some additional capacity is to make the case for membership to these organisations.

10 May 2009