

The European Humanist Federation

We are a democratic federation of (mostly) national humanist and secularist organisations from across Europe. Our work is described in detail on our website – www.humanistfederation.eu. In brief, we represent the interests of the non-religious to the European institutions - the EU, European Parliament, Council of Europe and OSCE - and (to a limited extent) to other institutions including national governments. In the EU we fought unsuccessfully for a decade to oppose special rights for churches and other religious institutions; now we continue to oppose church plans to extend those rights.

We develop policies, publish pamphlets and hold many conferences, often jointly with member organisations or others.

Since 2005 the EHF has attended the annual Human Dimension Implementation meetings convened by OSCE ODIHR and has intervened regularly in relevant sessions of the plenary assemblies. We have hosted side-events on the following subjects:

- The Status of Non-believers in Europe
- Equality between believers and non-believers
- Separation of Church and State, of Religion and Governance, of Dogma and Law
- Freedom of Religion and Belief: Views at Odds (*on 8 October 2008*)

EHF has filed a number of recommendations in different occasions. At the High-level conference in Bucharest, June 2007 the following two recommendations were presented :

- The struggle for human rights is a vital contribution to the development of democracy, but human rights are threatened by governments that give a privileged position to religious bodies and base legislation on religious morality and rules. We therefore recommend that OSCE ODIHR report on the extent to which these practices are found in member states.
- An emerging trend which is a source of concern to humanists is that which considers churches as the only source of moral values for the whole of society with the effect of shaping laws according to religious doctrine. This trend undermines democracy and the rule of law and is the single most important source of discrimination against non-believers, homosexuals and members of religions different from the established one. We recommend that public service broadcasters - a crucial educational and awareness-raising tool – uphold equality of citizens by providing humanist as well as religious broadcasting, i.e. programmes about how it is possible to live an ethical and useful life without religion.

www.humanistfederation.eu



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THE EUROPEAN HUMANIST FEDERATION

The European Humanist Federation, based in Brussels, unites humanist and secularist organizations across Europe.

- We promote the principles of humanism and of a secular society, opposing discrimination against non-believers and fighting for equal treatment.
- We work in the European Union (where we are officially recognised as a partner for dialogue) and we cooperate with like-minded Members of the European Parliament.
- We work with the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly.
- We are especially active in the human rights wing of the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe), contributing to its conferences and making the case against religious privileges and in favour of democracy and the rule of law.
- We work with our member organisations, help them with information and assist with their campaigns.
- We gather and share information, develop policies, hold meetings and conferences and publish booklets.

Humanism

Humanists believe:

- that we have only one life
- that we can live good and fulfilling lives without religious or superstitious beliefs
- that we can make sense of the world by using reason, experience and shared human values
- that morality is a natural human attribute, the result of our evolution (since long before we were human) as social animals
- that we can ourselves create meaning and purpose for our lives
- that we should seek to live happy and fulfilled lives and that one important way to do this is to help others to do so.

Humanism is an ethical world-view, not just an atheist or agnostic one. For many non-religious people it is a 'lifstance' that frames answers to so-called 'ultimate questions' about life in the same way that a religion does for believers. It is a 'belief' in terms of Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights - the article that protects freedom of 'religion or belief'.

Humanism itself is fundamentally committed to human rights: if this is the only life we have, people should have the maximum freedom to live it according to their own beliefs. In this commitment to the open society, where difference is acknowledged and no final answers are imposed, Humanism differs utterly from those religions and ideologies that seek to impose their own notion of truth or right living on everyone. Humanists defend the civic virtues of democracy, which requires the negotiation of differences and the art of compromise as the best method for achieving social consensus.

Humanists defend the right of others to their own beliefs and life styles, subject only to them not interfering with other people's rights - hence our hard work to oppose constant religious efforts to restrict personal freedom, especially sexual freedom, reproductive freedom for women, especially contraception, abortion, and artificial insemination, to oppose scientific research in matters such as genetics and to resist voluntary euthanasia - the right to die with dignity. We are also opposed in principle to attempts to inculcate religious or other beliefs in children at an age when they are unable to decide for themselves: we value the autonomy of the individual over the rights of communities to indoctrinate to their children.

Humanism, however, is an approach to life, not an ideology. It does not require assent to a set of ready-made answers that you have to take on trust. Rather, it is a framework of shared beliefs within which you are responsible for finding your own answers and living your own life.

Secularism

A vital element in Humanism is secularism or *laïcité*.

This is the principle that, in a plural, open society where people follow many different religious and non-religious ways of life, the communal institutions that we share (and together pay for) should provide a neutral public space where we can all meet on equal terms. The European Court of Human Rights has stated (*Refah Partisi et al. v. Turkey*) that it considers the principle of secularism as one of the founding principles of the rule of law and the best guarantee for democracy and the respect of human rights.

Secularism requires that civil society find a common ethic, acceptable to all its members. It is the opposite of theocracy and rejects not just the establishment of a specific sect or denomination as the official religion of the state but also legal or other official discrimination in favour of religion at large or of any particular religious group.

Thus supra-national, national and local government and public institutions - public hospitals, schools, broadcasting etc.- should remain even-handed towards all different belief systems and the organisations and groups (churches etc) that embody and represent them.

A secular or *laïque* society is not an anti-religious one. Rather, it is one where fundamental beliefs that we disagree about – beliefs that provide strong motivation to some but mean little or nothing to those who do not hold them - are left aside in public debate about communal decisions.

The religious may find inspiration and motivation in their beliefs, and they may bring experience from their lives that can offer insight and value. But public debate should be conducted in terms we can all understand and should be based on principles we can all agree about. Only such a society can truly respect the freedom of religion or belief of all its members.

It is contrary to the principles of secularism:

- that organisations representing religion or belief (including Humanism) should be given privileged access to the EU institutions
- that public services for general use should be contracted out to organisations representing religion or belief
- that there should be more than minimal exemptions on grounds of religion or belief from laws forbidding discrimination
- that religion or belief should be protected from criticism, mockery or "defamation" - but laws against incitement of hatred of individuals on the basis of their beliefs are legitimate and often required.