

David Pollock - European Humanist Federation

Remarks for OSCE HDIM meeting in Warsaw 25 September 2007

In 1989 in Vienna, OSCE member states agreed (in the words of their concluding document) to

(16.1) - take effective measures to prevent and eliminate discrimination against individuals or communities on the grounds of religion or belief in the recognition, exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms in all fields of civil, political, economic, social and cultural life, and to ensure the effective equality between believers and non-believers;
(16.2) - foster a climate of mutual tolerance and respect between believers of different communities as well as between believers and non-believers.

Today, 18 years later, that equality is still very far from established. People with non-religious beliefs, people who reject religion, are generally not seriously persecuted - Muslims who leave Islam may be an exception needing particular attention - but they are far too often ignored and excluded by Governments while religion - especially the Christian churches - continues to enjoy huge privileges from the State.

Last year at this meeting I talked about the principles involved, and since then we have set out our vision of Europe's universal values for liberal democracy in the Brussels Declaration, which was launched on 27 February at the European Parliament All Party Group for Separation of Religion and Politics. That statement has won huge support from politicians, academics and other distinguished people across Europe. It is on line at www.vision4europe.org.

This year, however, I want to give some examples of inequality between believers and non-believers. First, financial support – taxpayers' money from all citizens being given to the churches.

The Church of Denmark gets about 12% of its income in grants direct from the Government. Norway also gives massive financial support to churches.

In France Roman Catholic churches built before 1905 are owned and maintained by the Government at a cost of about €100mn a year,

and priests are housed by local councils at a cost of about €50 mn a year.

In Greece too the Government pays for the maintenance of church buildings.

The salaries and pensions of priests are paid by the Government in Greece, Luxembourg, Belgium, Hungary, the Czech Republic and elsewhere.

In Iceland everyone has to pay a church tax which is passed on to their own churches - but humanists are not allowed to have it paid to the humanist association: the state takes their tax.

In Italy about 7% of income tax goes to the churches - the vast majority to the Roman Catholic church

What this amounts to is a financial life support mechanism that sustains the power of the churches long after their popular support has waned.

And it is not just money. Just a few examples:

In Britain, the Church of England - which has under 1 million worshippers in a population of 60 mn - has 26 seats in the upper house of our Parliament, which it uses to block laws it does not like.

In Cyprus, marriage is governed by the churches.

In many countries some schools - sometimes the majority - are run by the churches, at Government expense: children at these schools are usually taught religion as a fact, not a disputed belief.

Even in state (non-church) schools religion is often a compulsory subject, and Governments often pay for clergy to give religious instruction. In Britain, religious worship is required by law even in non-church schools.

In many countries, the historical legacy of institutional power enjoyed by the churches ensures that laws on divorce, family planning, abortion, genetic research, euthanasia and so on are based on Christian doctrine and not on the will of the people.

Many countries have concordats with the Vatican that entrench the privileges of the Roman Catholic church and make it impossible for Parliament or Government to modify or remove them.

What is more, in the European Union, churches have a highly privileged position. Not only do they have routine consultations with the Commission twice a year and regular seminars paid for by the EU. They also have a joint meeting with the Presidents of the Council, the Parliament and the Commission every 6 months at the start of each new Council Presidency. In a pretence of equality the EHF has had two short meetings with the Commission in 3 years. This is not **the effective equality between believers and non-believers** that OSCE called for in 1989. Rather, it is entrenched privilege for religion - especially Christianity. With church attendance down in many countries below 10%, and with 25-50% of European citizens rejecting belief in God, it is high time that Governments stopped this policy of religious privilege and discrimination against the non-religious that is such a blemish on our democracies.

Before finishing I must react to some things that have been said this morning.

The ODIHR reporter on Islamophobia referred (I think) to my own speech yesterday and said I had confused criticism of religion, which was legitimate, with defamation of religion, which should be forbidden.

The speaker from the Observatory spoke about Christianophobia and said: "Religions should be protected from disrespectful portrayal of their beliefs".

The representative of the Holy See said that mockery of religion was a "subversive attempt to undermine freedom and tolerance".

These are all blatant attacks on freedom of speech. They are attempts to extend the human right of freedom of religion or belief, which belongs to individual human beings, to become freedom from criticism for religious beliefs and religious institutions.

The speaker on Islamophobia tried to draw a distinction between criticism and defamation. It is a distinction without a difference – it is a matter of perception by the individual.

Mockery of religion may be in bad taste but it is an inalienable part of freedom of speech. Mockery may sometimes amount to incitement to hatred, but only in very limited circumstances. Religion is generally hugely privileged in our communities. It is often worthy of respect – but human rights belong to individuals, not to institutions or religions, and attempts to extend human rights to religion itself and to religious institutions are a false and dangerous development that is to be resisted.