

## Our concerns

Current concerns include:

*supra-nationally:*

- pressure from the Vatican with support from some politicians, notably in Germany, for religion to play a larger part in the constitution and working of the EU
- a tendency in some parts of the European Commission to identify the EU's interests with those of the Vatican
- proposals for an official status for churches at the Council of Europe
- the unwarranted privileged status of the Vatican as a state at the UN

*at national level:*

- failure of national governments and public authorities to give the same recognition to non-religious lifestances such as Humanism as they give to religions and to treat equally organisations supporting non-religious beliefs and give them equal standing with churches
- privileges given to religion, especially where the same privileges are not given to non-religious lifestances, such as:
  - church taxes, sometimes levied on people who have only nominal connection with the churches in question
  - delivery of public services through religious organisations, including schools, health services etc
  - direct financial subsidies of churches (payment of clergy salaries, upkeep of buildings, etc) out of public funds
  - laws based explicitly or implicitly on religious doctrines - divorce, euthanasia, contraception, abortion, etc. - denying freedom to those whose beliefs differ from the dominant ones in their community
  - church representatives taking part *ex officio* in the national legislature
  - legally compulsory prayers and worship in schools
  - moral education in schools based exclusively on religious doctrine.

Visit our website at <http://www.humanism.be> for more details.

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**European Humanist Federation**

international association under Belgian law

**Fédération Humaniste Européenne**

association internationale de droit belge

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## INTRODUCING THE EUROPEAN HUMANIST FEDERATION

The European Humanist Federation brings together 36 humanist and *laïque* organisations from 17 countries. It is run by a board elected at annual General Assemblies and has a small office in Brussels. It is recognised in Belgian law as an international association.

### EHF and OSCE

EHF's interest in participating in OSCE events is dictated by two pillars of the OSCE mission, namely defence of the rule of law and the prevention of conflicts. In 1986 OSCE member states undertook to "foster a climate of mutual tolerance and respect between believers of different communities as well as between believers and non-believers".

This second commitment has been widely disregarded. Although non-believers form a large part of the population they are commonly ignored by national and international institutions in dialogues to promote mutual understanding, in policy consultations, in service provision and even in laws against discrimination. By contrast, increasingly deferential attitudes are shown to religious organisations.

This is a growing source of concern as religious groups, particularly including the Roman Catholic church, insist on having an institutional role in the law-making process on all matters having an ethical content and, in particular, on questions concerning sexual and reproductive life. While it is perfectly legitimate for churches to promote rules based on their transcendental beliefs to their own followers, to enshrine religious moral principles in legislation and official administration seriously infringes the human rights not only of those with other beliefs (or none) but also of their own community, many of whom may wish to make up their own minds on such issues. This constitutes a flaw in the effective implementation of the rule of law.

## Humanism

Humanism is a "lifstance" that for many non-religious people provides answers to so-called "ultimate questions" about life in the same way that a religion does for believers. Different elements are emphasised in different countries but all Humanists believe:

- that we can live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs
- that we only have one life and we should make the best of it by creating meaning and purpose for ourselves and by making sense of the world using reason, experience and shared human values
- that we should try to live happy and fulfilled lives and help others to do so
- that the way to achieve this is to live responsibly, thinking rationally about right and wrong, considering the consequences of our actions and trying to do the right thing.

Humanism is an ethical worldview, not just an atheist or agnostic one. It is fundamentally committed to human rights. It is without any doubt a >belief= in terms of article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights - the article that protects freedom of "religion or belief".

### Secularism or *Laïcité*

A strong element in Humanism - dominant in some countries - 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. 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 groups (churches etc) that purport to represent them.

A secular or *laïque* society is not an anti-religious one but one where the fundamental beliefs - beliefs that we disagree about or that mean little or nothing to many of us even as they provide strong motivation to others - are left aside in public debate about communal decisions. Instead public debate is conducted in terms we can all understand and based on principles we can all agree about. Only such a society can truly respect freedom of religion or belief.

### The Non-Religious in Europe

In Europe a large minority of the population has no religion - probably at least 25%, but figures vary with the exact question asked. Many who call themselves religious no longer have any meaningful belief but hesitate to shed the outward

profession of it. Most of the non-religious population are implicitly humanist - although only a small number (very different from country to country) adopt the label for themselves.

### European Humanist Federation activity

The EHF acts for humanists - and unbelievers generally - in particular with respect to the European institutions. In many of our actions we are happy to work with religious groups that also support the idea of *laïcité* or the secular organisation of society. We take part in OSCE, Council of Europe and European Union activities. In recent times:

- we have made repeated and strong representations in favour of a >secular= (= neutral) constitution for the European Union. We have so far been successful in preventing the Preamble attributing European democratic and other values to Christianity (at best a gross oversimplification if not simply untrue). We have so far been unsuccessful in opposing a special arrangement for the Commission to consult churches and other 'religion or belief' organisations, separately from the ordinary arrangements for NGOs. We say that this gives too much influence to churches that are often authoritarian, undemocratic and disdainful of human rights. Not least, they are often unrepresentative of their own members= views on issues such as sexual morality, marriage, divorce and euthanasia.
- we have had a meeting - the first, we hope, of a series - with the President of the EU Commission
- we have argued against the proposed concordat between the Vatican and the Slovak republic, the draft of which proposes to define rights of conscientious objection entirely in terms of Roman Catholic doctrine. We have worked in this with the European Parliament All Party Group for Separation of Religion and Government.
- we have represented humanists to BEPA - the Group of European Policy Advisers to the European Commission - and have taken part in the Expert Committee of the European Commission on issues related to bioethics (GAEIB) and other initiatives supported by the European Commission.
- we have taken part in OSCE and Council of Europe conferences and seminars, submitting several policy papers. We are in addition part of the coalition of NGOs formed to support the 2006 Belgian presidency.
- we hold meetings, take part in international conferences, liaise with other organisations (including faith bodies interested in dialogue and common action), participate in initiatives of the EU, Council of Europe and OSCE such as the forthcoming EU European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008, etc.