

## EUROPEAN HUMANIST FEDERATION STATEMENT IN OSCE ODIHR PLENARY SESSION, WARSAW, 10 OCTOBER 2006

I am David Pollock, the President of the European Humanist Federation. Humanism is a non-religious world-view or life-stance: we believe that this life is all we have and that we can and should lead good lives by the use of reason, experience and shared human values.

That, like everything I have to say this afternoon, is seriously abbreviated. If some of what follows lacks necessary qualifications, I apologise, but you will understand the constraint imposed by a four-minute time limit.

Seventeen years ago, OSCE member states agreed (I quote) to

**take effective measures to . . . ensure . . . equality between believers and non-believers.**

That was in 1989. Equality for non-religious people - probably about 1 in 4 of the European population - has still not been achieved. In some ways the situation is actually getting worse, despite the OSCE and despite the European Convention of Human Rights, which bars discrimination on the basis of 'religion or belief' where - note well - 'belief' has been held in numbers of Human Rights court cases to include atheism and non-religious lifestyles such as Humanism.

Yet laws still often speak only of religion where they should include non-religious belief.

Governments often refuse to meet or consult with non-religious groups despite routine consultation with religions.

Many states subsidise one or more churches out of public funds, with grants, clergy salaries or free maintenance of church buildings.

Religious schools are often paid for by the state, and

Religious education in public schools, even when it is broader than instruction in a single faith, extremely rarely even mentions the non-religious alternative.

This is not equality.

Despite these huge privileges the churches want more.

In Slovakia the Vatican is pressing for a concordat that would define rights of conscience exclusively in terms of Roman Catholic doctrine, with huge consequences for family planning and other health services.

Elsewhere the churches demand exemption from laws against discrimination. They want freedom to treat women, gays and people of other beliefs unfairly even while they complain about criticism of their anti-social attitudes.

In the European Union the churches already have private consultations with the Commission, and recently a special status for churches has been proposed in the Council of Europe.

**Am I suggesting that the churches - and other religions - should not be listened to? that they should play no part in public life?**

Not at all. If what we are seeking is an **open, democratic society**, then all can and

should play their part.

But religious organisations should not have the privileged position they currently enjoy. They should come down to the public forum and participate on the same level terms as everyone else.

What is required is that **the state remains neutral** as between different religions & beliefs. Religion and belief are intensely personal matters of conviction and conscience. How should governments be taking sides in such affairs?

And it matters. We are not talking of your friendly neighbours living quietly by their faith, but of over-weening wealthy institutions, usually totally undemocratic internally, that seek to stop family planning programmes, sabotage the campaign against AIDS, prevent stem-cell research and impose on all of us the morality and strict rules they derive from their private religious beliefs.

Yet politicians, moved by expediency, are making dangerous concessions to them that are inconsistent with democracy and human rights.

Hence the Humanist call for equality, so that neither they the believers nor we the non-believers are given any privileged status at all.

10 October 2006