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DISCRIMINATION BY THE EUROPEAN UNION AGAINST THE NON-RELIGIOUS

Remarks by Staffan Gunnarson, Swedish Humanist Association.

My name is Staffan Gunnarson from the Swedish Humanist Association. I am also a member of the Board of the European Humanist Federation.

Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights guarantees freedom of religion or belief. Several cases before the European Court of Human Rights have established beyond doubt that 'belief' here includes non-religious beliefs or lifestyles, such as Humanism.

Article 14 of the Convention requires that enjoyment of Convention rights shall be without discrimination on grounds including religion or belief.

The European Union is fully committed to the Convention and has similar provisions in its own Charter of Fundamental Rights. It has introduced a directive forbidding discrimination on grounds including religion or belief in employment and is now working on a directive forbidding such discrimination in the provision of goods, facilities and services.

Yet at the heart of the European Union there is discrimination on grounds of religion or belief. It is discrimination in favour of religions and against non-religious beliefs, and it arises in the implementation - in anticipation of ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon - of Article 17 of the revised Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. This requires the EU to maintain a regular, open and transparent dialogue with churches, religious organisations and what it calls 'philosophical and non-confessional organisations' - that is, bodies representing non-religious beliefs. The European Humanist Federation is plainly the major such organisation. It is also strongly committed to human rights, in particular freedom of religion or belief.

The discrimination can be most clearly illustrated by an example. The simplest example is this. Each year in May the Presidents of the Commission, the Parliament and sometimes the Council invite to a meeting representatives of the Christian, Jewish, Muslim and sometimes other religions. The European Humanist Federation, arguing that the EU should not discriminate in favour of religions and against non-religious lifestyles, has every year for the last four years requested an invitation. Every year it has been refused.

The effect is to suggest that Humanism is less worthy of attention and respect than religion. Similar complaints, it may be said, can be made against many individual member states, which recognise religious bodies or favour them in one way or another, often financially, while ignoring the non-religious, but for the EU, which seeks to set standards, to discriminate in this way is deplorable.