

THE 2018 HUMAN DIMENSION IMPLEMENTATION MEETING**Working session 7: Fundamental freedoms I, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief (13/09/2018)****Giulio Ercolessi, European Humanist Federation president**

The European Humanist Federation, which is the largest umbrella organisation of humanist and secularist associations in Europe, is deeply concerned by the widespread lack of interest and attentiveness for the safeguard of some of the fundamental principles upon which the very fabric of our civilisation was built.

Many of these principles are put at jeopardy by politicians who pose as the keepers of our “real” identity and tradition. And mainstream politicians are often inclined to come to terms with those claims, thus letting their openly nationalist and populist competitors to impose their narrative and set the political agenda. If trampling on the human rights of minorities is the most evident consequence of the present regressive wave, keeping in force the existing limitations to freedom of thought and expression through blasphemy laws is another and not less relevant one.

They have become a part of policies aimed at using the autochthonous traditional religion, or whatever other item may be found in each of our countries real or invented “tradition”, as tools of exclusion. Tools that are used as ideological weapons to be brandished against real or supposed minorities, against liberal or progressive believers and/or against the immigrants.

But there is also another, more intelligent and apparently more “inclusive” version of this repeal of freedom of thought, when blasphemy laws are extended to protect all religious faiths. As our societies are more and more secularised, many religious leaders demand a renewed “public recognition” and renewed privileges. And when such claims come from the religious communities newly established in our countries, other long-established churches often try to seize that opportunity to ask for a renewed “public role” of all religious organisations, that would inevitably confine non-believers and maverick believers in the position of second class citizens, like the Dhimmis in the Ottoman Empire.

Repealing all blasphemy laws has become today part of the defence of our open societies. If we don’t act consequently, if we appease the intolerant, we should not be surprised if sooner or later Voltaire’s writings are prohibited once again somewhere (maybe in the school libraries as a first step).