

Humanists want a society that values cooperation and compassion at least as much as competition. It must be fair, inclusive and secular – that is, giving no privilege to any particular religion or belief, including Humanism. We call it an ‘open society’; one that is “based on the recognition that people have divergent views and interests and that nobody is in possession of the ultimate truth.”¹

The election of members of Parliament in June 2009 gives every citizen of Europe the opportunity to vote for representatives who support these principles.

The promotion of human rights is at the heart of the development of the European community.

The human right of freedom of religion or belief can only be adequately protected if the government, laws and all official institutions remain neutral with regard to religion or belief (which in law includes non-religious beliefs and atheism etc). This is the meaning of a secular state.

Europe and its institutions must therefore function independently of religious or philosophical belief and must keep strictly to the principle of separation of religion and politics.

Policies must not be distorted by religious or any other dogma but rather founded on considerations of human rights.

For example,

* Policies on development aid must not exclude providing condoms as a protection against AIDS in response to pressure from the Vatican.

* Policies on scientific research must not bow to religious demands to avoid funding work with embryonic stem cells.

* In foreign relations, trade must not be so dominant a factor that considerations of human rights are neglected.

* Free speech must be defended vigorously against

Islamist and other demands for religion to be protected from criticism.

* If the EU touches on matters of family law, abortion or euthanasia, religious dogma must not be allowed to limit the rights and wishes of the majority.

* Similarly, Europe must commit itself to eliminating unfair discrimination based on religion or belief no less than on gender, sexuality, race, disability or age. The current draft Directive risks entrenching discrimination by religion while protecting the religious from discrimination against them. It will need careful scrutiny.

The European Union is becoming more involved in education, through its interest in ensuring an adequately educated labour force and in social cohesion.

As it does so, the EU must avoid endorsing - and should preferably oppose - the huge privileges given to religion in the education systems of most member states, through funding of religious schools and support of religious education even in public schools.

Dialogue with Religion :

Formally, the EU has no concern with religion or belief.

But the Lisbon Treaty - like the many drafts of an EU Constitution that preceded it - contains a

clause requiring “open, transparent and regular dialogue” with the churches. (In theory the European Humanist Federation, as a ‘non-confessional organisation’, gets the same privileges, but we fought hard for ten years against this Treaty provision and we use it only to counter the influence it gives the churches.)

Although the Lisbon Treaty is not yet ratified, the dialogue has been in progress for many years.

This includes many ad hoc meetings in addition to regular encounters such as those listed by the President of the Council of Roman Catholic bishops (COMECE) in a speech that you can read on our website:

(a) seminars with church representatives on “fundamental issues”, arranged by the European Commission

(b) talks with the government providing the six-monthly presidency of the EU Council

(c) annual meetings of representatives of churches and non-Christian religions with the Presidents of the Council, Commission and Parliament.

[In May 2008, these were attended by 13 bishops, 4 rabbis and 4 Muslim dignitaries. The EHF was refused an invitation - a plain act of discrimination on grounds

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of 'religion or belief' and a breach of the requirement for 'open' dialogue.]

But the COMECE President said: "These talks . . . are in our view not enough to satisfy the offer of an open, transparent and regular dialogue".

We do not know what else they want, but in a 2002 paper submitted to the EU Commission for the Constitutional talks, the bishops (Catholic, Lutheran, Orthodox and Anglican) asked for:-

- "pre-legislative consultation . . . enabling Churches . . . to comment on planned legislation"
- "regular dialogue seminars" with Commission officials
- "working sessions on . . . issues whenever the churches . . . have a particular concern"
- "presidential-level meetings between the President of the European Commission and high level representatives of the Churches"
- a "liaison office within the services of the Commission" in order to develop a "partnership" with the Commission.

The Parliament (with a series of invitations to elderly male religious leaders) and the national presidencies of the Council are also guilty of favouring religion.

For example, the French presidency called a meeting on 19 December 2008 with delegations from member states who were required to include one government official, one rabbi, one imam and one priest with a

view to fostering EU dialogue with the "three principal religions".

The EHF and BHA are not opposed to dialogue with religious organisations or with anyone, but

(a) we think it should be held in the general framework of consultation with non-governmental organisations

(b) meantime, it should not discriminate against us and in favour of religion.

The dialogue with the churches is on matters of EU competence - e.g., the big meeting in May 2008 discussed climate change; this May they will discuss economics and ethics.

Church influence will grow as the EU gradually stretches its central economic remit into areas where religious doctrine could be very damaging - education, scientific research, social cohesion and other social issues.

We need to ensure that this does not happen. There is already a small group of MEPs who are active in the Parliament in defending laïcité and separation of religion and politics. They need support.

Letters to candidates can do two things:

1. identify future friends
2. make all MEPs more aware of the strength of public opinion against religious privilege.

What to do now

Please write to as many candidates in your constituency as possible. You can find who they are at www.europarl.org.uk The vital question to ask is:

Do you agree that religion and politics should be kept separate in the EU?

There is no need to write a long letter - you can refer if you wish to some of the points given here, but it is better to write a very short letter to all the candidates in your Euro constituency than a carefully argued letter to only one or two.

Please send us a copy of the replies you receive (or give us exact quotations) so that we can know which MEPs are sympathetic to us and which are not. This will enable us to write to sympathetic MEPs after the election and suggest that they join the Parliament's Working Group on Separation of Religion and Politics. This valuable group maintains pressure on the EU authorities to prevent improper influence and privilege for religion.

Please send the replies to the BHA either by e-mail at local@humanism.org.uk with the subject "EP", or by post to Pepper Harow, BHA, 1 Gower Street, London, WC1E 6HD marking the envelope "EP"

We will share this information with the EHF.

Thank you!