

EHF, European Humanist Federation side-event
Tuesday 25 September 2007

Separation of church and state, of religion and governance, of dogma
and law

Introductory remarks

David Pollock, EHF president

Religious belief - that is Christian belief - has been in decline in Europe since the eighteenth century and that decline is accelerating.

The advance of scientific understanding in particular has rendered the 'God of the Gaps' unnecessary - even where we do not yet have an exact scientific answer, we can see the way in principle to finding one and have no need to seek "supernatural 'answers'".

Today between a quarter and a half of the population of Europe has no belief in a god - the proportion depends on the question you ask, and of course it differs from country to country, but *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* published earlier this year brings together extensive strong evidence for a figure of 25-50%.

With the decline of Christianity over the centuries, the idea that humans have a purpose imposed on them by their creator has declined; and from the 18th century alternative ideas of human freedom to choose our own goals, of the "rights of man" - human rights - have arisen instead.

But people have changed faster than their institutions.

The mediaeval church had power to rival that of kings. After the Reformation the wars of religion between Catholics and Protestants led to a close identification of church and state.

This entanglement of churches and the constitutions of our countries lingers on, but by defending it both churches and states detract from human rights. Church direction of people's lives, laying down rules and enforcing them on everyone, not least by promoting legislation based only on religious doctrine, may have been understandable in an age when religious dissent was close to sedition or treason. But today when churches seek to impose their patterns of behaviour on everyone, especially if they use historically privileged positions of power, they infringe human rights in the name of institutional privilege.

And they do do so - from threats by Cardinal George Pell of Sydney that "Catholic politicians who vote for this [genetic research] legislation must realize that their voting has consequences for their place in the life of the Church" to the huge and utterly disreputable campaign of deliberate lies and distortion run by the churches in England to oppose a Bill to legalise assisted suicide for people who are terminally ill and in excruciating pain. The Bill was supported by 8 out of 10 members of the public, but in the end the Church of England bishops turned out in force to vote it down in the House of Lords.

That is the background to our meeting tonight. In a moment Vera Pegna is going to speak, and then Hanne Stinson, but first I want to say something briefly about the European Humanist Federation, Humanism and secularism.

Those 25-50% of Europeans who do not believe in God take a variety of views which for the most part belong within the wide scope represented by EHF member organisations. We have 38 member organisations in 17 countries. Some - especially in countries where the Catholic church is still very powerful - emphasise the need for separation of church and state. They campaign in the name of *laïcité* or secularism - where secularism means the neutrality of the state on matters of belief and its disengagement from religious institutions.

Others, while endorsing the need for secularism, promote the idea of

Humanism as a belief system that can fulfil for individual unbelievers some of the same role as religion does for believers. They trace an implicit humanist tradition back to Confucius, Socrates, Epicurus and the Stoics, emerging again after the Dark Ages, especially in many of the Enlightenment philosophers.

The elements of this humanist lifestance are

- that the best available explanations of life and the universe are the naturalistic and provisional answers provided by scientific enquiry and the use of reason;
- that moral behaviour is by evolution a natural part of being human, of human nature;
- that this is the only life we have and that it is our responsibility to make life as good as possible not only for ourselves but for others;
- that we create meaning and purpose for ourselves by adopting worthwhile goals and endeavouring to live our lives to the full.

Humanists are deeply committed to the human rights of the individual, so that each of us can decide best how to lead this, our only life; but we also value highly community and cooperation, since these are fundamental to our nature as social beings.

I will now ask Vera Pegna, a former member of the EHF's board, to speak.

Vera Pegna, EHF representative to OSCE

OSCE/ODIHR are busy helping governments in eastern European countries improve their democracy and I believe they are doing an excellent job. But what about us in the West? Should we not check and see how our democracy and rule of law are faring? This is what EHF had in mind in devoting this side-event (thanks to ODIHR) to the

Separation of church and state, of religion and governance, of dogma and law - a matter which Western European countries have settled long ago, or rather which they have unanimously proclaimed long ago and for sure partly settled but seldom or never checked. However, democracy being an unfinished business, it would be wise to take stock of the situation now and then.

But why raise this issue here and now? Here because for OSCE/ODIHR human rights and security are intertwined and have to be looked at globally as the best way to prevent conflicts even in the long run - and now because in the last decade or so churches have been seeking to re-assert for themselves a role in public life. And this impinges on democracy and on the rule of law. Official confirmation of this trend can be found in numerous statements issued by the Vatican hierarchy and by Pope Benedict himself. Moreover, a first concrete move in this direction can be found in Article 15 (former article 52 of the *European constitutional treaty*) of the new *European Reform Treaty establishing the European Community* which Pope Ratzinger greeted with the words: *our institutional rights are now guaranteed*. We do not know what institutional rights for churches are, but what we do know is that a treaty or constitution is there to stay and any provision it contains may be used to claim privileges and/or rights for years to come. Now, let me remind you of a fundamental fact. The Catholic Church (in its attire as Holy See) has taken the lead in seeking this new public role for churches although the Holy See is the only European state that has not signed the ECHR. And history tells us that when the Catholic Church was in command these were sorrowful moments for human rights. You can understand why humanists and secularists and more generally for people who cherish democracy are concerned by these developments.

But after all why should churches not have institutional rights? Why according to the rule of law which Western democracies have espoused as their system of government should church and state be kept apart, as well as religion and governance, dogma and law? The reason is straightforward and "non negotiable" to use one of the Pope's favourite expressions. Democracy is a "form of government that is representative in character, in which the executive is

accountable to the elected legislature or the electorate" (p.81 OSCE Human Dimension Commitments). The key concept here is representation through elections to which church hierarchies are alien, being self-appointed bodies. Churches may well claim they represent their followers but this is a very flimsy claim since Eurobarometre tells us that around 80% of Europeans do not attend religious services and an even higher percentage do not heed church injunctions on contraception, divorce and so on.

If churches were to become formal institutional players this would start by giving undue influence to private, unrepresentative bodies and end by changing the very nature of democratic legitimacy particularly as, for a number of reasons that vary from one country to the next, churches wield a disproportionate amount of power with respect to their dwindling flocks. Besides - and this is a major source of concern - since, as a rule, politicians and the media support the churches' moves, the public at large is barely conscious that our democracies are being reshaped by non-elected bodies becoming involved in the democratic process.

The discussion is now open.