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**European Humanist Federation**

international association under Belgian law

**Fédération Humaniste Européenne**

association internationale de droit belge

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**OSCE Conference on Combating Discrimination  
and Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding  
Plenary Session 3**

***Bucharest, Romania  
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The European Court of Human Rights stated a number of times that secularism is a founding principle of the rule of law and the best guarantee for the safeguard of democracy and for the full implementation of human rights.

For this reason I wish to draw your attention on an emerging trend which is a source of concern to humanists world wide and which consists in considering churches as the only source of moral values for the whole of society, with the effect of shaping laws according to religious doctrine. This constitutes the single most important source of discrimination against non-believers, homosexuals and members of religions different from the established one. Besides, it is heavily discriminatory against women as it interferes with their freedom of conscience, particularly in matters pertaining to their sexual and reproductive life.

At ODIHR meetings religious representatives often denounce the discriminations they undergo and some of these are indeed appalling. But here, at this OSCE conference, as in most national and international fora, far from being discriminated, religions are the privileged players. Practically the whole of this High level meeting to combat discrimination is devoted to them, whereas people who have no religious allegiance, i.e. humanists, atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, rationalists and people who simply don't care about religion and whose morality, needless to say, is in no manner inferior to the morality of believers, are represented by one person belonging to a single organization, the European Humanist Federation. Yet, depending on how the non-religious are defined, they constitute between a third and a half of the European population and they are the single largest group of citizens which all the member states discriminate both *de jure* and *de facto*. They are not consulted by governments and public authorities on social or policy matters - even those of direct concern to them such as religious education in schools - they are rarely invited to participate in intercultural dialogues or interreligious dialogues, although international law considers philosophical beliefs on an equal footing with religions. In this regard, let me express our deep appreciation to OSCE and to the

CoE who have recognized the danger for democracy in ignoring non-believers and have opened their doors to their contribution.

The question I put to you, ladies and gentlemen, is the following: should the fact that such a large slice of the population is ignored by the authorities be a matter of concern for these people alone, or should this absence of formal institutional representation and consultation be a source of concern for all those who uphold equality and the rule of law? I wonder what Mr. Dudu and Mr. Mattei would have to say in this respect.

Some people say that yes, non-believers are discriminated but less so than some religious minorities in a number of countries. Our reply to this is threefold: 1) a problem needs to be named if it has to be addressed, 2) history teaches us that discrimination is a breeding ground for tensions and conflicts, 3) we refuse to set hierarchies in discriminations, especially in the context of OSCE whose mission is the prevention of conflicts.

Up until a couple of decades or so ago our democratic systems worked, albeit with inadequacies and shortcomings, following the shared principles inherent in secularism. Our MPs agreed and disagreed and compromised on that basis. Religion and governance were kept apart as reason had triumphed over the divine. Religions were loosing ground, churches were emptier, vocations were rare in Europe and had to be sought elsewhere.

Now religions are on the march again and their fundamentalist components are ever more demanding and intrusive in the public domain; although the European style of fundamentalism is more suave and different from that of other religions, the aim is always the same: imposing religious doctrine by law. But this is one half of the story. The other half is the inadequate response of our politicians who, since their ideological underpinnings have been discredited, do not mention principles any more - these being specific norms one refers to for reasoning and action - but turn to religion as the sole provider of "values".

The following examples illustrate the above remarks. They concern the Catholic Church and/or its different apparitions that may be the Holy See or the Vatican as the case may be. I shall take Italy which is considered by Pope Benedict as uniquely emblematic of Roman Catholicism and thus the ideal ground for an attack against the creeping secularisation of Europe. In the case of a bill granting legal rights to unmarried couples, the Italian Bishops' Conference and the Pope himself (a foreign citizen, mind you, and head of a foreign state) dictated what he called "non negotiable principles" which the bill had to abide by and brought to bear undue pressure on Catholic politicians, public servants, medical practitioners, pharmacists to toe the Vatican line, even if this entails breaching the laws of the state.

The second example concerns Slovakia where the Vatican pressed 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.

Lastly the EU where churches now have "institutional rights", says Pope Benedict and what he means is that - although unofficially and without public debate - the churches have been effectively granted a droit de regard on bills before they reach the European Parliament. Which means that again freedom of conscience is at risk in matters such as abortion, euthanasia, stem cell research.

The unifying stance which dictates these intrusions seems to be Pope Ratzinger's condemnation

of relativism which, translated in plain language for the man in the street, simply means that pluralism and freedom of thought may well send you to hell. And hell does exist; you can take Pope Benedict's word for it.

Ladies and gentlemen, I recalled the plight suffered by some religious minorities in Europe. I recalled the discrimination against non-believers exercised by all the European governments. As a rule, these evils have a common root: the predominance of one religion and its tight links with power politics. However, I believe these evils also have a common solution: the effective separation of church and state, of religion and politics, of dogma and the law. It is not religions as such that are divisive but the use they are put to by their leaders, by politicians, by intellectuals.

I submit that we NGOs who can make our voices heard in such an eminent arena go beyond considering ODIHR as our wailing wall, and ask OSCE to help us advance in the direction pointed by the European Court of Human Rights. This means developing awareness of the benefits of secularism and of our right to secularism which alone guarantees equality and freedom of religion and belief for all.

Thank you.

Vera Pegna  
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representative to OSCE

Bucharest, 7 June 2007