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## **2014 EU elections: A call by the European Humanist Federation to stand for secularism and human rights**

EHF (19.11.2013) - In the perspective of coming EU elections, the European Humanist Federation (EHF) believes that the EU should take the following considerations into account for the benefit of all European citizens.

### ***Secularism and European institutions***

EU institutions must remain independent of all religions and beliefs. Individual EU office-holders must assiduously maintain neutrality in their public and official pronouncements and behaviour, whatever their personal beliefs.

Every citizen has the right to believe or not, which is a private matter, but it is necessary to ban any religious influence on policies and on the organization of the society itself. Since the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, the European institutions are required to conduct "an open, transparent and regular dialogue" with churches and non-confessional organisations. Too often the non-religious have been ignored or given inferior treatment, though an EHF complaint to the EU Ombudsman has produced some improvement recently.

### ***EHF believes that the EU must:***

- Fully respect the principle of the **separation of public institutions and churches;**
- Remain vigilant to **defend secularism against those who attack – directly or indirectly – fundamental rights** such as gender equality, LGBT rights, freedom of thought and expression, sexual and reproductive rights of women, sexual education, freedom of scientific research, access to education for all etc.;

- **Clarify its guidelines regarding the implementation of Article 17 TFEU** by the European institutions, covering (for example) who is allowed to take part and what topics are discussed;
- Guarantee **complete transparency in appointments to expert and ethical committees** assisting the working groups of the European institutions.

### ***The defense of the rule of law, democracy and human rights***

Populist movements have been growing in Europe for more than 20 years and the financial and economic crisis has reinforced the problem. They attack democracy in depth and do not constitute a credible political alternative. They exacerbate social tensions and popular suspicion of democratic processes. They also contribute to the spread of racist, xenophobic and homophobic attitudes which oppose human rights and undermine the European project. Such situation demands a strong and coordinated European answer.

### ***The EHF calls on the EU to:***

- Uphold the fundamental values of the Union and to act by all diplomatic and legal means against Member States violating these values and derogating from common EU rules and to **set up a rule of law mechanism** ("Copenhagen Commission" or high-level group) to ensure compliance with the rule of law by all Member States;
- Set up a **coordinated strategy** to fight against the spread of fundamentalism and populist parties;
- Adopt a pro-active attitude in all its institutions (Commission, Council and Parliament) in order to **complete its system of anti-discrimination legislation**;
- **Press for removal of all national laws against blasphemy** as recommended by the Council of Europe;
- **Defend economic and social rights of European citizens**, especially in the Member States that are most exposed to austerity measures imposed by international institutions;
- Defend the maintenance or the creation of **high-standard public services**;
- Promote European citizenship and the **active contribution of citizens** to the public decision-making process.

### ***Scientific research policy***

Scientific research policy must be free from religious vetoes. Scientific research should be guided only by reason, experimentation and demonstration subject to ethical approval by impartial bodies.

### ***EHF calls on the EU to:***

- **Defend freedom of inquiry as the basis for scientific research**: its limitations are those of means, public order and the law itself which is the result of societal choices democratically decided;

- **Resist to the attempts of some religious organisations** to obstruct the development of European research on the basis of religious doctrine;
- Take into account, in its decision process, **the criteria of general interest** that European research must necessarily involve. The priorities of this research should not be based only on economic criteria.

### ***International relations***

International relations should respect human rights, individual freedoms guaranteed by the state and reject all forms of discrimination including those based on gender, sexual orientation, ethnic origin, religion or beliefs.

### ***EHF calls on the EU to:***

- Pay a special attention for **respect for human rights and the rule of law in any future accessions** to the European Union;
- Ensure that cooperation agreements of the European Union contain **strong clauses of democratic conditionality**;
- Adopt a proactive approach to **promotion of freedom of conscience and religion** among the partners of the European Union, which implies the freedom not to believe and the freedom to change one's belief;
- **Defend freedom of expression** which includes freedom to criticise religious and philosophical beliefs, and to advocate for the suppression of blasphemy laws in the world.

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## **EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief: the road ahead**

**By Dr Mark Barwick, Human Rights Without Frontiers**

HRWF (11.09.2013) - Freedom of Religion or Belief (FORB) is a universal human right which is protected under Article 18 of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). By adopting guidelines for FORB in June of this year, the EU has committed itself to mainstream these principles in its external policies and sets a standard for its foreign relations.

The Guidelines will be an important reference for EU officials as they promote FORB in third countries, seek to prevent FORB violations and respond to situations where such violations have occurred. The Guidelines also set out actions and measures which the EU can take toward countries that violate FORB.

The efficacy of this instrument highly depends on the EU's readiness to implement the principles and actions contained therein. At the heart of these efforts, particularly in the beginning, will be **training**. It is fair to say that most EU officials, whether in Brussels or serving as EU representatives in third countries, have little or no knowledge of FORB. COHOM and its Task Force on Freedom of religion or belief must be proactive in disseminating the Guidelines as widely as possible. It must also ensure that all EU personnel are properly oriented in terms of their promotion, implementation and mainstreaming potential.

**Monitoring and reporting** will likewise be vital to the success of the FORB Guidelines. For monitoring to be effective there must be a culture of transparency and the sharing of information. It is clear that discretion is necessary in certain situations where people's safety is at stake; on the other hand, a steady stream of updates, good practices and lessons learnt would keep all actors on board and foster an environment of collegiality and cooperation.

*Human Rights Without Frontiers* welcomed the inclusion of civil society in consultation and development of the FORB Guidelines. EU authorities who are charged with FORB implementation would do well to continue this policy and engage civil society on a regular basis in FORB promotion, training and consultation. Specifically, the Guidelines call for an evaluation after three years which includes multi-level consultation with civil society. However, the creation of mechanisms that ensure **early and regular consultation with civil society** would also be a prudent action to take. Civil society consultation could help ensure accountability and timely follow-up at every phase of the initial three-year period.

Certain **procedural elements** of the FORB Guidelines will require more clarity over the coming months. EU missions will need more guidance on FORB implementation in specific situations and on what actions to take. This implies training on identifying volatile situations where violations are likely to occur. For instance, some violations are more easily detected than others, such as the enactment of discriminatory laws, the confiscation of property used for religious purposes or evident acts of violence against a religious or belief minority. Other violations are more difficult to gauge, such as social hostility and general intolerance. Informational materials and training opportunities designed to address such matters would go a long way toward awareness and mainstreaming of FORB understanding within the EU and its representatives.

Finally, the Guidelines also call for a **regular exchange of views** with relevant bodies within the European Parliament as well as political dialogues with partner countries and regional organisations. Such actions, when carried out with serious intent, will have a positive influence on the recognition of FORB standards on a wider scale internationally. They will also help prevent and respond to FORB violations "in a timely, consistent and coherent manner" (par B.6). Such a commitment on the part of the European Union can contribute to fostering greater respect for human rights not only in third countries but within Europe as well.

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## **FECRIS annual conference in Copenhagen: A well-known journalist and human rights activist shocked by the dominant intolerant discourse**

*An interview of Bashy Quraishy, a Danish-Pakistani journalist and consultant regarding minority rights*

Watch <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQJuHpLZBtQ&feature=share>

### **1. Who is Bashy Quraishy?**

### **2. Summaries of some excerpts**

#### ***Who is Bashy Quraishy?***

He was born in India, but grew up in Pakistan. He is a member of a number of Commissions, Committees and Boards involved with Human Rights, Ethnic/Religious

Equality Issues, anti-racism, anti-discrimination, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, both in Denmark and internationally.

On the Danish level, he is the Chief Editor of MediaWatch, which is a quarterly magazine on media and minorities, Chair of media monitoring organisation, Fair Play and member of the Advisory Council of Danish Human Rights Institute.

On the international level, from 2001 – 2007, he was President of ENAR – Brussels that is the largest EU network against racism with over 700 member organisations. Since Nov 2007, he is Chairman of ENAR's Advisory Council, Chair of the European Platform for Jewish Muslim Co-operation, member of the "Board of Trustees" of the Dutch Foundation " More colour in the media", General Secretary of the network, EMISCO - European Muslim Initiative for Social Cohesion and Member - Advisory Board - Migration Research Centre - Hacettepe University - Ankara.Turkey. He is also senior adviser to COJEP International, a France based inter-cultural youth organisation and from 2005-2007 sat on EU Commission's High Level Committee on the Social and Labour Market integration of disadvantaged ethnic minorities in EU.

Quraishy contributes regularly to the Danish and European press with essays, chronicles and TV debates as well as lectures on various issues concerning Ethnic Minorities in EU, Islam in the Western Media, benefits of inter-culturalism, globalization, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, Racism's consequences and Integration's dilemma in Europe. Since January 2010, he hosts TV programme - Bashy's Corner – at TV Channel Greater Copenhagen.

### ***Summaries of some excerpts***

#### ***The journalist shocked by the intolerant speeches against certain religious groups***

"I had a personal experience with FECRIS recently. A friend of mine in Belgium in a conference gave me a booklet which was written by some German researchers, and the booklet is about religion state and society. When I read it, I was shocked. How much influence and power and money this organization gets to make negative campaigns about anyone they don't like. So when a friend of mine told me there was a conference in Copenhagen, and as a journalist I could go there, I went there and I can tell you I was absolutely not happy. I was disgusted by the tone of the speeches there, the campaigns they were making against certain religions, and also how secretive they were. One speaker came after another and not one suggestion on how to deal with the issues. Just campaigns against certain sects and certain religions. That is not the way I think an organization which claims to be open, to protect the victims of sects and religions, to be themselves so secretive and so, I would call, you know, very strange way of acting."

#### ***Islamophobic statements***

"Concerning a board member of FECRIS, a Russian expert who advises the Russian government, I saw recently many articles and lectures on YouTube which are totally anti-Islam and Islamophobic. They're not helping people but they are actually sowing the seeds of hatred."

#### ***The journalist publicly accused of being a Scientologist***

"When I made an interview with their President Mr. Tom Sackville and I asked him "Why don't you take people to court instead of making campaigns and why is it such a secretive conference. Why don't you invite all people in the society? Then I asked him

"Why are you going after Scientology and Jehovah's Witnesses"? And they got very angry. They actually blamed me for being a scientologist. When I gave them my press card, and actually one of their board member the vice president of FECRIS had met me in Geneva in Human Right conference, he recognized me. But I was amazed by the way they were there and the way they were treating a guest, the way they were actually trying to harass. "No, you are from Scientology. What are you doing here? Are you a spy?" And their president went on podium and pointed at me and said "Here is Mr. Bashy Quraishy, he is a scientologist. Be careful." (...)

"I was shocked. I could not believe that an organization that presents itself as the guardian of civil rights of individuals against brainwashing is doing the same. And when I challenged them, they didn't like it. So I left and I have complained to the Council of Europe on the way they treated me, not me as a person but I went there as a journalist. I actually wanted to write something nice about them. I wanted to see what kind of good work they are doing. I wanted to see what kind of information they are bringing to the society. But unfortunately that experience was the most horrible I had in my life in hundreds and hundreds of conferences I've taken part in." (...)

"The only job of their organization in Russia, in France, in Belgium, in UK, in Canada is to campaign against people who are spiritual or religious." (...)

"It is the duty of civil society to stand up, to make alliances, to expose such organizations, to expose such movements, who are actually hindrance in communication, hindrance in people coming together. Instead of creating bridges, they are actually destroying those bridges." (...)

### **Protests at the Council of Europe**

"They are now part of the Council of Europe. They get money from French government or from other governments, and they have influence in many decision-making processes, where they spread their poison against religions of different types." (...)

"I complained to the President of NGO Federation of the Council of Europe, who I have known and worked with for many years. I received a very kind email from their office telling me that they are looking into that issue and they will contact me very quickly. I can tell you now very openly that I'm not the type of person who will be oppressed or who will be trampled upon. Wherever I go, I have a very big international platform in many different ways. I talk about religious discrimination. I'll talk about those forces who are actually harassing NGOs and the small religions and the big religions who are trying to fulfill certain needs among people. So I am not going to stop here. I am going to talk about it. It is not a vendetta for me, it is not that I am only against them, I am against anybody who spreads poison in society and who divides people instead of bringing them together. That is my biggest wish."

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## **Human Rights Without Frontiers welcomes the EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief**

HRWF (25.06.2013) - *Human Rights without Frontiers* welcomes the adoption of the EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FORB) by the EU Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) on Monday 24<sup>th</sup> June in Brussels. The Guidelines on FORB are the result of the EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy which the Council adopted one year ago.

FORB is a universal human right which is protected under Article 18 of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). By adopting the FORB Guidelines the EU is mainstreaming and prioritising it in its external policies and sending a strong signal that all countries should respect them. *Human Rights Without Frontiers* welcomes the fact that the Guidelines cover the rights not only of believers but also of non-believers.

The Guidelines will be an important tool for EU officials in third countries to reference in identifying FORB violations and assisting citizens who have been discriminated against on the basis of their religion or belief. The Guidelines set out the actions and measures that the EU can take at multilateral-fora, regional and bi-lateral levels against countries which violate FORB.

*Human Rights Without Frontiers* has been pleased to be involved in the drafting process of the Guidelines along with religious communities and civil society at all stages of the drafting process.

*Human Rights Without Frontiers* along with religious communities and civil society will continue to monitor the implementation of the Guidelines and hold the EU accountable to its commitments.

**More about the guidelines:**

**EU Guidelines on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief**

[http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/137585.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/137585.pdf)

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## **CSW welcomes new European union guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief**

CSW (24.06.2013) - Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) welcomes today's decision by European Union (EU) Foreign Ministers in Brussels to adopt [Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief](#), fulfilling a commitment that was made in the EU Human Rights Strategy one year ago.

As the tenth set of EU human rights Guidelines, the document outlines priority areas and operational tools for the promotion of religious freedom, with the aim of equipping the EU to support individuals and communities who face infringements to this right, addressing violations when they occur and preventing future incidents. As the Guidelines are public, they can also serve as a tool for third parties to hold the EU to account on its own commitments.

During the Swedish EU Presidency in 2009, the EU adopted its first Council conclusions on Freedom of Religion or Belief, which were followed by Conclusions in 2011 as a response to violent incidents on religious grounds in the Middle East and Africa. Following the Arab Uprisings, questions of religion or belief in authoritarian regimes, fragile states and societies in transition came to the fore with an explicit need for the EU to develop policy on how to respond to these complex issues and developments.

In adopting the Guidelines, the EU acknowledges that religious freedom violations, committed by state and non-state actors alike, are widespread and complex, affecting societies and individuals everywhere, including in Europe. It also clarifies the EU's own position towards religion or belief, not aligning itself with any specific view or conviction, but upholding the right of the individual to choose and change, adopt or abandon a conviction according to one's conscience.

CSW's Senior Advocate at the EU Sofia Lemmetyinen said, "CSW welcomes the EU's important contribution to the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief. Religious freedom is neither about excluding religion or belief from our societies, nor about promoting any particular belief, but ultimately about creating an environment conducive to the development of democratic, peaceful and pluralist societies, where individuals are allowed to think, seek, doubt, and believe freely, and where they can manifest their inner convictions alone or in community with others. We hope the EU will continue to repeat this message and live up to this promise both within its borders and in its global partnerships."

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## **A more secular Europe, divided by the Cross**

New York Times (17.06.2013) - Stanislav Zvolensky, the Roman Catholic archbishop of the Slovak capital here, was thrilled when he was invited to Brussels three years ago to discuss the fight against poverty with the insistently secular bureaucracy of the European Union.

"They let me in wearing my cross," the archbishop recalled.

It therefore came as a rude surprise when, late last year, the National Bank of Slovakia announced that the European Commission, the union's executive arm, had ordered it to remove halos and crosses from special commemorative euro coins due to be minted this summer.

The coins, designed by a local artist, were intended to celebrate the 1,150th anniversary of Christianity's arrival in Slovak lands but have instead become tokens of the faith's retreat from contemporary Europe. They featured two evangelizing Byzantine monks, Cyril and Methodius, their heads crowned by halos and one's robe decorated with crosses, which fell foul of European diversity rules that ban any tilt toward a single faith.

"There is a movement in the European Union that wants total religious neutrality and can't accept our Christian traditions," said Archbishop Zvolensky, bemoaning what he sees as rising a tide of militant secularism at a time when Europe is struggling to forge a common identity.

In a continent divided by many languages, vast differences of culture and economic gaps, the archbishop said that centuries of Christianity provide a rare element shared by all of the soon-to-be 28 members of the fractious union. Croatia, a mostly Catholic nation like Slovakia, joins next month.

Yet at a time when Europe needs solidarity and a unified sense of purpose to grapple with its seemingly endless economic crisis, religion has instead become yet another a source of discord. It divides mostly secular Western Europe from profoundly religious nations in the east like Poland and those in between both in geography and in faith like Slovakia.

In nearly all of Europe, assertive secularists and beleaguered believers battle to make their voices heard. All of which leaves the European Commission, in charge of shaping Europe's common aspirations, under attack from all sides, denounced by atheists for even its timid engagement with religion and by nationalist Christian fundamentalists as an agent of Satan.

Asked about such criticism, Katharina von Schnurbein, the commission official responsible for outreach to both religious and secular groups, smiled and said, "I can assure you that the European Commission is not the Antichrist."

Europe is suffused with Christianity, or at least memories of its past influence. The landscape is dotted with churches, now mostly empty, and monasteries, its ancient universities are rooted in medieval religious scholarship, and many of its national crests and anthems pay homage to God.

Even the European Union's flag — a circle of 12 yellow stars on a blue background — has a coded Christian message. Arsène Heitz, a French Catholic who designed the flag in 1955, drew inspiration from Christian iconography of the Virgin Mary wearing a crown with 12 stars. The same 12 stars appear on all euro coins.

The very idea that Europe should unite began with efforts to rally Christendom in the ninth century by Charlemagne, the first ruler of the Holy Roman Empire.

Throughout its modern history, however, the "European project," as the Continent's current faltering push for unity is known, has sought to keep religion and the unruly passions it can stir at arm's length. The 1957 Treaty of Rome and other founding texts of what is today the European Union make no mention of God or Christianity. The Brussels bureaucracy, in its official account of Mr. Heitz's religion-tinged flag, ignores the Virgin Mary, stating instead that the 12 stars "symbolize the ideal of unity, solidarity and harmony among the people of Europe."

"There is a general suspicion of anything religious, a view that faith should be kept out of the public sphere," said Gudrun Kugler, director of the Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians, a Vienna-based research and lobbying group. "There is a very strong current of radical secularism," she said, adding that this affects all religions but is particularly strong against Christianity because of a view that "Christianity dominated unfairly for centuries" and needs to be put in its place.

Ms. von Schnurbein dismissed accusations of an anti-Christian agenda. The European Union, she said, "is often seen as trying to eliminate religion, but that is really not the case." She added, "We deal with people of faith and also people of no faith."

Obliged by treaty to consult with religious and secular groups, the European Commission, said Ms. von Schnurbein, attaches "great importance" to this dialogue, which she described as "unique" for an international body.

The commission's monetary and economic affairs department that ordered Slovakia to redesign its commemorative euro coins says it had no real problem itself with halos and crosses and demanded that they be deleted in the interest of "religious diversity" because of complaints from countries that also use the euro.

Leading the charge was France, which enforces a rigid division of church and state at home, and objected to Christian symbols appearing on Slovak money that would also be legal tender in France. Greece, where church and state are closely intertwined, also protested, apparently because it considers the Greek-born monks Cyril and Methodius as part of its own heritage.

For the European Union's most strident critics, the dispute has been a godsend, buttressing their argument that Brussels is an alien, meddling and sinister force. "I need to voice a serious and disturbing suspicion: that the E.U. is under the control of Satan or Satanism," said Rafael Rafaj of the Slovak National Party, a far-right nationalist party.

The view that the European Union serves Satan has become a popular theme for some extreme Christian fundamentalists, who cite the Bible's Book of Revelation as proof that dissolving national boundaries signals an approaching apocalypse.

Yet, several of the union's most senior figures are themselves Catholics, as were most of its founding fathers, including Germany's first postwar chancellor, Konrad Adenauer. Germany's current leader, Angela Merkel, the daughter of a pastor, has been outspoken in defending Christianity, telling supporters worried about the increasing number of Muslims that "we don't have too much Islam, we have too little Christianity."

The Brussels bureaucratic apparatus, however, is "uncomfortable with religion," said Lucian Leustean, a scholar at Aston University in Britain and the editor of a 2012 book, "Representing Religion in the European Union: Does God Matter?"

This is partly due to the rise of well-organized secular groups that pounce on any hint that Christians are being favored over other religions or nonbelievers. But a bigger reason, said Mr. Leustean, is a shift in demography and public attitudes.

Church attendance is falling across Europe as belief in God wanes and even cultural attachments wither. The Continent's fastest-growing faith is now Islam. In Britain, according to a poll last year, more people believe in extraterrestrials than in God. In the European Union as a whole, according to a 2010 survey, around half the population believes in God, compared with over 90 percent in the United States.

The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe slowed the secular tide somewhat as the European Union began to admit new and sometimes deeply religious countries like Poland and Romania. Jacques Delors, the president of the European Commission in the 1990s, kicked off a debate on the "soul of Europe" and held informal meetings with church and other religious leaders.

But when Europe set about drafting a constitution in the early years of the last decade, demands that Europe's Christian heritage be mentioned ran into bitter resistance and were eventually dropped. The religious question resurfaced again with the 2007 Treaty of Lisbon, which skipped any reference to Christianity and instead paid tribute to the "cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe."

It mandated dialogue with religious groups. But it also ordered equal treatment for "philosophical and non-confessional organizations," which include groups whose principal philosophy is hostility to organized religion.

Archbishop Zvolensky of Bratislava predicted that efforts at European unity are doomed unless the union gives a bigger place to God. "Religion should be the inner strength of the union," he said.

He does see one encouraging sign: Slovakia's national bank has decided to stick with its original coin design and abandon plans for a halo-free minting in honor of Cyril and Methodius.

The European Commission has gone along with this, and the commemorative coins will finally be minted next month — two months later than originally planned — but with halos and crosses.

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**Freedom of religion or belief in external EU policies**

EPPSP (06.05.2013) - On the 25<sup>th</sup> of April the European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Politics (EPPSP) posted a meeting on freedom of religion or belief in external EU-policies.

In her introductory speech EPPSP Chair Sophie in 't Veld (NL, ALDE) clarified the issues at stake: "How can the European Union and its' member states actively assure the protection of freedom of religion and promote a secular democracy via external policies through for example the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the staff in embassies?"

EPPSP Vice Chair Dennis de Jong (NL, GUE) stressed the importance of some aspects concerning freedom of religion: the freedom to change religion or belief, the collective right of the exercise of this liberty. According to the guidelines for the EU officials of European External Action Service (EEAS), the EU does not promote any religion or belief. Human rights are there to protect people no institutions. The EU must demonstrate absolute neutrality in religious matters. The question of how to protect non-organized non-believers deserves our attention as well. "All religions and beliefs, also non-religious beliefs, deserve protection" Mr de Jong concluded.

Mr Lorenzo Zucca, Reader in Jurisprudence at King's College London demanded that attention should be given to the "real problems": rights of women and children and the protection of ethnic (not only religious) minorities. He warned for the European "hubris" while promoting and introducing ("imposing") our secular values to non-Western countries. He also touched upon the difference of freedom of religion within the EU and in foreign affairs. MrZucca also stood still at the uniqueness of the right of religion: does it need special protection?

Mr Robert-Jan Uhl, OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights Adviser on Freedom of Religion or Belief stated that the freedom of religion is recognized in various international conventions and treaties (going back to Helsinki, 1975). He explained some basic elements of the freedom: right to build places of worship, prisoners' rights to moral and spiritual assistance, the legal personality of religious organizations. According to MrUhl, the EU could do more on the right of religious objection for instance. He stressed the need for more training of EU officials when working abroad. Also, he said the EU applies sometimes double standards: for ex. blasphemy laws, recognition of religious organizations, and protection of individuals.

In his intervention MEP Michael Cashman (UK, S&D) stated that religion is a private matter and that imposition of religion or religious values on others is simply unacceptable. End must be made to the intolerance towards homophobia by religions.

Questions from the audience concerned the inclusion of non-believers rights in the Human Rights council of the United Nations (and the role of EU institutions). Some severe critique was uttered on the attitudes of the representative of the EEAS.

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## **US panel slams Europe's 'aggressive secularism'**

France 24 (01.05.2013) - A US government report released Tuesday criticised European countries for promoting "aggressive secularism", including a French ban on full-face veils and prohibitions elsewhere in Europe on religious attire, ritual slaughter and circumcision.

A US panel criticized France and other Western European countries Tuesday for "aggressive secularism" as it released a report on religious freedom that took special aim at laws banning full-face veils in public.

For the first time, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, whose members are appointed by the White House and Congressional leaders, included a chapter on the region in its annual review of tolerance of other faiths around the world.

Because Western Europe generally has a very good record, "it's easy to overlook the fact that there are some questions and problematic issues emerging there" related to religious dress and customs, commission chair Katrina Lantos Swett told reporters.

"In some countries a very aggressive secularism is putting people of religious faith in uncomfortable and difficult positions."

### **French veil ban**

The report focused in particular on restrictions in Western Europe on religious attire and symbols, ritual slaughter, circumcision, and the building of mosques and minarets.

"These, along with limits on freedom of conscience and hate speech laws, are creating a growing atmosphere of intimidation against certain forms of religious activity in Western Europe," the report said, adding that such restrictions "seriously limit social integration and educational and employment opportunities for the individuals affected."

The report addressed laws in France and Belgium that ban the wearing of full-face veils in public, noting that Muslim women who do so can now be stopped, questioned and fined by authorities.

The review also referred to measures against religious groups characterized as "cults" and "sects," saying France has the most extensive restrictions but also mentioning Germany, Austria and Belgium.

"One of the problems with these sorts of laws, that are singling out a particular minority religious group, is that they send a signal that some people may take justified discrimination against members of that group," Elizabeth Cassidy, the commission's deputy director, told AFP news agency.

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## **Ombudsman encourages Commission to issue guidelines on dialogue with religious and non-religious organizations**

European Ombudsman (01.02.2013) - The European Ombudsman, **P. Nikiforos Diamandouros**, has encouraged the European Commission to clarify how it conducts its dialogue with religious and non-religious organisations and, if necessary, draw up concrete guidelines on this issue. This follows a critical remark he made over the reasons the Commission put forward when refusing to conduct a dialogue seminar with the European Humanist Federation on the exemption for churches provided in European employment rules. The Commission partly explained its refusal by saying that the Union needed to respect the status of churches and religious organisations in the Member States.

The Ombudsman failed to see how engaging in a discussion with the complainant on this issue could call this status into question. While acknowledging the Commission's broad margin of discretion concerning how it carries out its dialogue with religious and non-religious organisations, he stressed that the case represents a good opportunity for the institution to clarify its practices.

### ***Humanists proposed a seminar on special status of churches***

The Lisbon Treaty obliges the Union to maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with churches, religious associations, philosophical and non-confessional organisations. In this context, the Commission regularly organises "dialogue seminars".

The European Humanist Federation (EHF) represents 50 humanist organisations from more than 20 countries. In October 2011, the EHF lodged a complaint with the Ombudsman about the Commission's refusal to accept a proposal for a "dialogue seminar" on the exemption for churches provided in European employment rules. The EHF added that the Commission favours religious over non-religious organisations.

The Commission explained that the proposed topic would go beyond the spirit of the relevant Lisbon Treaty provisions, which state that the Union respects the status under national law of churches, religious associations or communities, and philosophical and non-confessional organisations. It also explained that dialogue seminars are meant to address wider issues.

The Ombudsman failed to see how engaging in a discussion with the complainant could call into question the status of, amongst others, churches and religious associations. However, he acknowledged the Commission's broad margin of discretion concerning its dialogue with religious and non-religious organisations. With a view to ensuring that the Commission can justify its decisions objectively, and can avoid even the perception that it discriminates against specific groups, the Ombudsman advised it to use the present case to clarify how it conducts its dialogue with such organisations and, if necessary, to draw up concrete guidelines.

The Ombudsman's decision is available at:

<http://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/cases/decision.faces/en/49026/html.bookmark>

The European Ombudsman investigates complaints about maladministration in the EU institutions and bodies. Any EU citizen, resident, or an enterprise or association in a Member State, can lodge a complaint with the Ombudsman. The Ombudsman offers a fast, flexible, and free means of solving problems with the EU administration. For more information: [www.ombudsman.europa.eu](http://www.ombudsman.europa.eu)

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