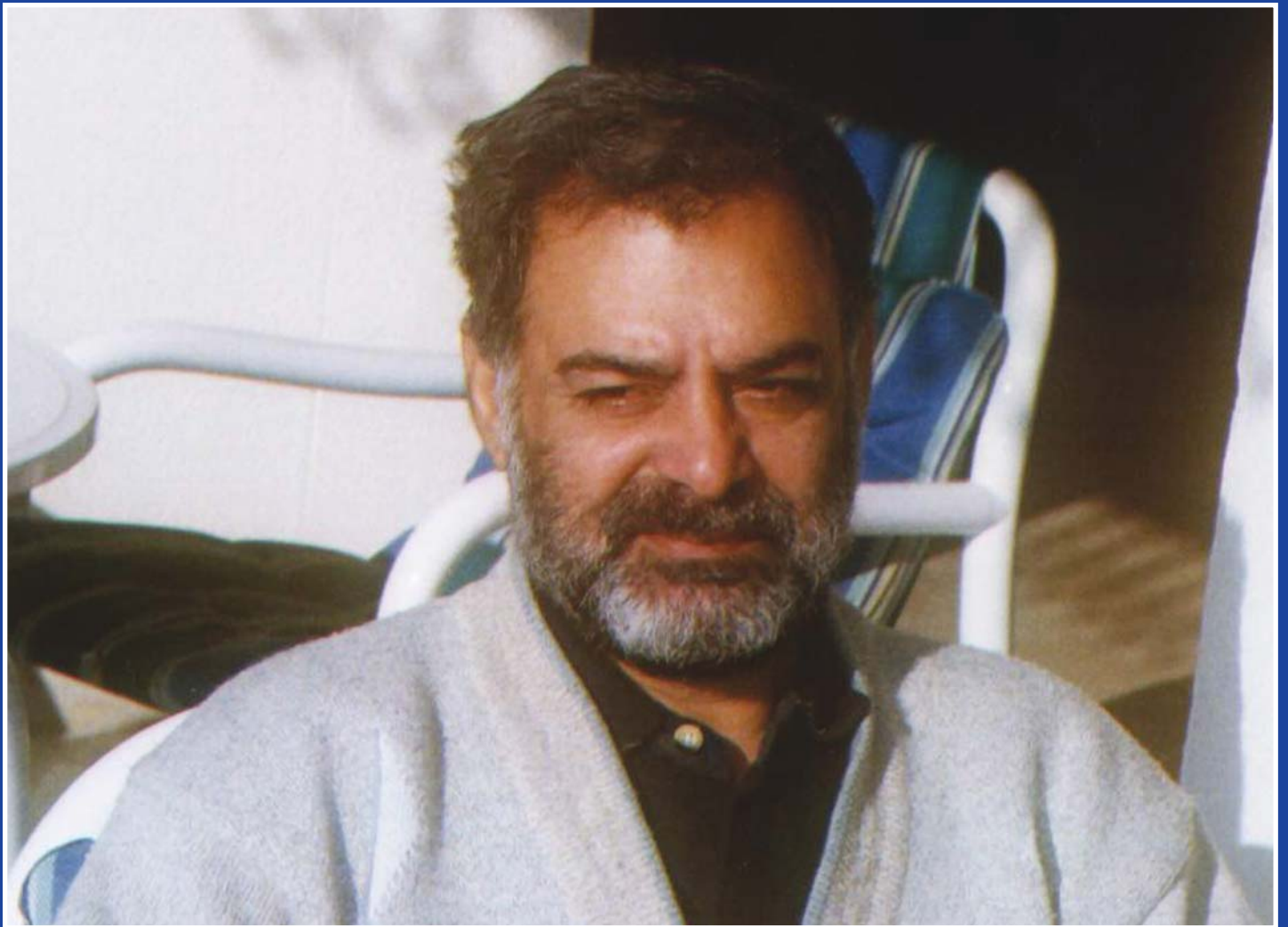




INTERNATIONAL HUMANIST NEWS

International Humanist and Ethical Union

February 2004
£5



Younus Shaikh Freed

Pakistani Doctor Jailed for Blasphemy
Released from Death Cell

INTERNATIONAL HUMANIST NEWS



February 2004

IN THIS ISSUE

News	3
From the President <i>Roy Brown</i>	4
Releasing Younus Shaikh <i>Babu Gogineni, Younus Shaikh</i>	5
Pakistan's Infamous Blasphemy Laws <i>Younus Shaikh</i>	6
The Fight for Democracy in Europe <i>Roy Brown</i>	7
Defending Freedom of Conscience <i>Matt Cherry</i>	9
IHEU Women's Conference: Empowering Women <i>Babu Gogineni</i>	11
Women's Sexual and Reproductive Rights <i>Diana Brown</i>	12
Political Islam and the Secularist Liberationist Women's Movement in Iran <i>Azam Kamgouian</i>	14
Women's Rights in Clerical Slovakia <i>Viera Faragulová</i>	15
Poland: Transformation into a Patriarchal State <i>Katarzyna Szumlewicz</i>	16
Engendering Change in Scotland <i>Joan Gibson</i>	17
No Gods, No Masters <i>Annie Laurie Gaylor</i>	18
How Humanism Can Help Bring Peace Between Arabs and Jews <i>David Ibry</i>	20
Canada: A Dangerous Trend <i>Sheila Ayala</i>	21
Nepal: The Power of Superstition <i>Ganga Prasad Subedi</i>	21
UN Reports <i>Sylvain and Phyllis Ehrenfeld</i>	22
News in Brief	23

Cover: Dr Shaikh after his release (see p. 5).
Back cover photo: RAWA.

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Views expressed herein do not necessarily
represent the viewpoint of IHEU.

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From the Executive Director

It is with great delight and immense satisfaction that I am able finally to report that our friend and colleague Dr Younus Shaikh was released from prison in Pakistan in November 2003 after a retrial acquitted him of all charges of blasphemy (p.5). Following much planning for his safety and rehabilitation, we can now state publicly that he is, at last, among friends. However, the intense campaigning and lobbying led by IHEU that helped achieve this spectacular success will not stop while several hundred other victims of Pakistan's barbaric blasphemy law continue to rot in prison.

For how long will religion attempt to influence legislation? Perpetually, it seems. In December 2003 IHEU held an international conference in Paris to highlight the dangers of Article 51 in the draft European Constitution (p.7). The Conference attracted attention, and IHEU's letter to European heads of government is being considered at cabinet level in at least two European countries. Since negotiations for the European Constitution will resume in 9 months time, we have more lobbying to do. IHEU member organizations Libre Pensée of France and the UK's National Secular Society deserve congratulations for bringing nearly 500 Humanist and human rights activists from 13 countries to the Conference.

If in Europe it is the churches which are aiming to expand their influence, in Canada alarm grows at the apparent success of Islamic groups in obtaining Islamic arbitration courts (p. 21). What makes the Canadian government think that all Canadian Muslims want Sharia courts? Speaking at a UN-related meeting in New York in November, I was delighted to see in the audience the Ambassador of the Organization of Islamic Conference. We discussed freedom of religion and belief, and his views are most decidedly in tune with modern democratic values. A Canadian-born Muslim, he is not keen on Sharia courts!

IHEU's Women's Conference was a great success (p. 11). Dedicated Humanist women's activists from 17 countries, including Iran and Iraq, Nepal and Slovakia, gathered together to discuss issues facing women worldwide. The Conference voted to create a Humanist Women's Empowerment Network, about which more information will follow.

The good news continues: I am pleased to welcome on board Suresh Lalvani as IHEU's Director of Operations. Suresh has had a distinguished professional background, and his recruitment is a big step forward for IHEU's growth and development. Wishing all IHEU's colleagues and friends a Happy New Year!

Babu Gogineni

INVITATION FOR ARTICLES

- IHN welcomes original, previously unpublished, non-academic contributions on subjects of interest to the worldwide community of Humanists. Articles should be around 1000 words.
- It is IHN's policy to use the word HUMANISM without adjectives or qualifications where the 'secular approach' is intended.
- IHN aims to be a source of reliable information – authors should ensure accuracy of facts and figures.
- Articles in IHN are widely reproduced or translated in various Humanist magazines all over the world. Articles submitted for consideration may not be submitted to other magazines before a decision is conveyed by IHN. A decision will be conveyed generally within three months of submission, but articles cannot be returned.
- Contributions should preferably be word processed and sent via email text, but not as attachments, because of virus complications. Photographs and illustrations are welcome.
- Contributors should include a complete address as well as a telephone and fax number where possible, along with a three-line biographical note.
- Contributors should note that articles published in IHN can be freely reproduced, but the IHN requires that the source and the author's name be acknowledged.

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Release of Dr Shaikh

Dr Shaikh, sentenced to death under Pakistan's Blasphemy Law, was acquitted, and released in great secrecy on 21 November. See report on p. 5.

IHEU Statement Supporting the Campaign 'NO to Political Islam'

Since September 11th, ordinary Muslims have found themselves under intense and increasing pressure from both sides in the conflict. In the West, anyone of Muslim origin is likely to fall under suspicion; many have been harassed by the police or beaten up by thugs. Several mosques have been attacked. Yet any Muslim prepared to speak out against the terrorists is likely to find himself threatened by the hardliners increasingly in control in Muslim communities. Few Muslims have been prepared to argue with the fundamentalists.

In Iraq and Afghanistan following the American invasions things can hardly be said to have improved for the man in the street (the women of Iraq having joined their Afghani sisters in no longer daring to venture out on to the streets unveiled or unaccompanied). Rape is now a daily occurrence in Baghdad yet the security forces do nothing to make the streets safer for women and have simply ignored protests from women's organizations, even banning demonstrations by women against the rising tide of rape and personal violence. The vacuum left by the defeat of the Baathists has been quickly filled by the Islamists.

In Afghanistan, any pretence that America was concerned to secure the human rights of the Afghani people is now seen as a hollow sham. The draft Constitution for Afghanistan calls for the reintroduction Islamic law – described as 'Taliban Lite' by one member of the US Committee for International Religious Freedom – with few of the safeguards demanded by international law or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And in Iraq, officials of the American administration have said that they see 'no problem' with Islam being recognized as the state religion. Where now the separation of religion and state, free thought and human rights?

It is against this background that the International Humanist and Ethical Union, IHEU, has decided to endorse and support the campaign 'NO to Political Islam', a campaign dedicated to championing the human rights of ordinary Muslims, men and women, and to freeing them from the tyranny of the Islamists.

IHEU supports freedom of belief and the separation of religion and state around the world. In Europe we campaign to keep references to God and special treatment for Christianity out of the European Constitution; in India to resist threats to the secular constitution; and worldwide against the power of the Vatican to deny reproductive health to countless millions of the world's poorest women.

NO to Islam Campaign website: <http://www.ntpi.org>

IHEU Appoints Director of Operations

Suresh Lalvani has joined IHEU as Director of Operations from 1 January, 2004, having been involved with IHEU since October 2003 as a volunteer.

Suresh is qualified as a chartered company secretary and accountant. His role at IHEU will be as Company Secretary, taking responsibility for financial management, fundraising, and servicing the membership, supporters, and Executive Committee. He will be responsible for managing the IHEU office and staff. He will be directly accountable to the Executive Committee via the First Vice President.

Suresh's early career was in financial management with international corporations. For the past 20 years, he has worked as finance and administrative director with a number of international NGOs. He has visited and reviewed programmes in over twenty countries in Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. He maintained contact and relations with government and non-government officials, agencies, and sources of funding.



IHEU General Assembly 27 and 28 May, 2004, Uganda

IHEU is pleased to announce its first General Assembly in Africa, to be held in Kampala, Uganda, on 27 May and 28 May (morning), 2004. The GA is open to delegates of IHEU Member Organizations, IHEU's International Representatives, IHEU officers, invitees, and paid-up individual supporters of IHEU.

Conference venue and accommodation:

Hotel International 2000, Tank Hill Road Muyenga (3 km to Kampala city centre), P.O. 4037, Kampala, Uganda

Tel. 256-41-510200/510201/510202 Fax. 256-41-510203

Email: hotel2000@africaonline.co.ug

Mobile: 256-71-110006 (contact Edison)

Please book your hotel rooms directly. Room rates: Single US\$40; Double US\$30 per person. Lunch and dinner buffet US\$6 per person.

As per IHEU Bylaws

IHEU Member Organizations should send the names of their official delegates to IHEU's London headquarters by **26 April, 2004 at the latest, in the prescribed form.**

Individual supporters who wish to attend the GA (as observers) should also inform the office by **26 April, 2004 in the prescribed form.**

Proposals for Agenda items and Resolutions need to reach IHEU's office in London by **26 March, 2004 at the latest.**

Registration Forms will be available on IHEU's website, www.iheu.org.

IHEYO General Assembly and Conference

Kampala, Uganda, 20-24 May 2004. Details from Gea Meijers (youth@iheu.org).

Paris Conference on Science

The Scientific Committee of the French federation Libre Pensée organized a public conference in Paris on 11 and 12 September 2003 on 'The Materialisms and their Detractors'. Attended by about 100 people, the conference discussed the centrality of materialism to science and responded to attacks against it. IHEU participated, with Babu Gogineni as guest speaker.

From the President

A Good Year for International Humanism

It has been a good year for IHEU and the International Humanist movement, culminating in the acquittal and release of Dr Younus Shaikh after three years in prison in Pakistan, the last two under sentence of death (see page opposite).

In March 2003, IHEU headquarters moved into new offices in Gower Street, London, and in December we announced the appointment of Suresh Lalvani as Director of Operations. Suresh brings to the position a wealth of experience in administration in voluntary organizations. He is joining Executive Director, Babu Gogineni at the London HQ.

The year also saw significant growth in funding for international Humanism, with over \$600,000 being donated by member organizations and associates to Humanist projects and groups in developing countries. A new hospital under construction at the M.N. Roy Campus in Mumbai, and 20 mother and child healthcare clinics being created in the slums of Mumbai, will provide the only medical facilities for a slum population of over 100,000 of the very poorest in society, regardless of race, religion, or caste.

During 2003, IHEU also supported campaigns on behalf of moderate Muslims, human rights, and women's rights organizations against political Islam (see www.ntpi.org), and against the incursion of organized religion into the institutions of the European Union. Our Women's Conference held in London in November was an outstanding success (pp. 11–19).

The New Year has also begun on a high note with plans now well advanced for the opening of our second office, in New York City, to provide secretarial support, conference and computer facilities for the IHEU UN delegation, and to house the new IHEU Center for Bio-Ethics – of which full details will be announced shortly.

For many in the West, Humanism is primarily a matter of philosophy, but for our colleagues in developing countries it is more often about social action, and too often can be a matter of life and death. Working to increase support for Humanist action worldwide is one of IHEU's key objectives. We encourage all member groups to play a role internationally in the development of Humanism. Some groups already do a great deal to support our newer sister organizations in developing countries, their humanitarian social programmes, and their efforts to promote rationalism and secularism. But we need to do far more.

During the coming year, IHEU will be announcing plans for improved coordination between donor and recipient organizations, launching a Humanist Partnership scheme, and inviting all member organizations to participate.

Religious Symbolism

A government commission has recommended a ban on the wearing of all religious symbols – Christian crosses, Jewish skull caps, and Muslim headscarves – in public buildings in France. While French secular and freethought opinion has unanimously welcomed the

recommendation, liberal and Humanist opinion outside France is divided on the issue, seeing a conflict between the demands of secularism on the one hand and religious freedom on the other.

Few Humanists would argue against a ban on the display of religious symbols in or on public buildings, or the wearing of religious symbols by public officials while on duty. But, critics argue, a ban on ordinary members of the public displaying the symbols of their faith would be in contravention of Article 18 of the UN Declaration on Human Rights which provides for *freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief ...* But no such freedoms can be absolute. No-one has the right to impose their cultural norms on others as a manifestation of their religion or belief. President Chirac, in supporting the proposed ban, has argued that Muslim scarves are symbols of the oppression of women, and a silent attack on the secular state. Ten years ago, it was unusual to see Muslim women and girls wearing headscarves but that has changed as French Muslims have become more assertive and more radical, seeing Islamic symbolism as a key part of their cultural identity.

Perhaps the final word should be left to the Muslim women. A number of French Muslim women's groups have spoken out publicly in favour of the ban, arguing that for most of them wearing headscarves is not a matter of individual choice but of social pressure to conform, in communities increasingly dominated by fundamentalism. Human rights begin and end with individual rights. For many Muslim women, real freedom will begin with the right *not* to wear headscarves in public.

Sharia Law in Canada

A recent change in the law in the Canadian province of Ontario has opened the way for the creation of Islamic tribunals to arbitrate in civil cases using Islamic, Sharia law (p. 21). The decision has been met with an outcry in the Canadian press, since the judgements of the tribunals will be enforceable by the Canadian courts – the first time in any Western democracy that Sharia law will have been given official recognition. Apologists argue that judgements will also be required to conform to Canadian Law, but this argument is hollow since much of Canadian civil law regarding divorce settlements, inheritance, etc., is permissive, while Sharia law is restrictive and frequently biased against women.

Many Canadian Muslim women will be under intense pressure to accept arbitration by these Tribunals in divorce, inheritance and custody cases, and will have no right of appeal against tribunal decisions.

For a western democracy like Canada to endorse the application of Sharia law – in no matter how limited a fashion – risks sending the wrong signals to the millions around the world suffering under the oppression of political Islam.

Roy Brown

Campaigning for the Release of Dr Shaikh

IHEU is proud to have been able to play the lead role in the campaign to secure the release of our colleague Dr Younus Shaikh. Dr Shaikh had been languishing in prison in Pakistan for over three years, most of that time on Death Row. He was arrested on trumped-up charges of blasphemy on 4 October 2000, tried, and sentenced to death in August 2001. He appealed, but the appeal court judges failed to agree on the verdict. In October 2003, a third Appeal Court judge annulled the death sentence but sent the case back to the lower court for retrial. Younus Shaikh was finally acquitted and released on 21 November 2003. Following his release he spent some time in great secrecy visiting family and friends in Pakistan before moving to a new home in the west.

IHEU became aware of Dr Shaikh's arrest the day it happened. We immediately launched a worldwide campaign to try to secure his release. Demonstrations were organized outside the Pakistani Embassies in London, Washington, and several other western capitals. An intensive letter-writing and email campaign was initiated through over 100 organizations, both IHEU members and kindred groups. A concerted diplomatic effort was mounted, involving contact with government officials in over 20 countries, and a face-to-face meeting with Pakistan's President Musharraf, to bring pressure to bear on the Pakistani government.

We maintained constant communication with Dr Shaikh throughout his ordeal by means of letters and through jail visits by colleagues. Everyone concerned was deeply impressed by the remarkable courage he displayed. His letters, dealing not only with his personal situation but with political issues and world affairs generally, were models of lucidity. It was hard to imagine



them being penned in a cramped, fetid cell in Death Row in temperatures sometimes reaching 46°C.

IHEU spent over three years drawing the world's attention to Dr Shaikh's case, and coordinated with the Sea of Faith and Amnesty International. We must particularly mention the tireless efforts of our Executive Director, Babu Gogineni, whose energy, drive, and determination for the cause never flagged. But finally, it is our colleagues in Pakistan (who for security reasons will remain unnamed) and Dr Shaikh's lawyers, who are the real heroes – taking immense personal risks to uphold the principles of civilized society and the rights of an innocent and courageous man.

From Younus Shaikh: Thank You!

Dear Friends,

I want to thank you, the many thousands of my supporters, who have campaigned for so long to secure my release from jail in Pakistan where, for the past two years, I have been under sentence of death on a charge of blasphemy.

My case was a travesty of justice. A loyal and law-abiding Pakistani, Muslim by birth, a medical doctor and college teacher, I was an innocent victim sentenced to death on false and fabricated charges under the infamous Pakistani Islamic blasphemy law, 295-C of the Pakistani Penal Code. I was convicted on mere suspicion, and trumped-up allegations of utterances I was supposed to have made at a lecture that did not actually take place. My accusers were mischievous fascist fundamentalist mullahs who did not hear or witness anything themselves. They were aided by Pakistan's ultra-corrupt and high-handed Islamic Police. My lawyers were subjected to mafia-style harassment regarding their children; with the Pakistani Taliban demonstrating their power with verbal violence outside the trial court.

The appeal court gave judgement in my case on 10 October 2003, expressing its dissatisfaction with the verdict of the lower court and sending the case back to

the lower court for retrial. The retrial was held in three sessions in November. This time I conducted my own defence. I was acquitted after the third hearing on 20 November and released amid much secrecy the next day. Following my release, I visited family and friends in Pakistan before moving to Europe.

I am very grateful for the demonstrations, letters, phone calls, interviews with the media and meetings with diplomats made by so many of you. Thousands of you copied your letters of protest to IHEU and I shall be emailing all of you in due course to give you my personal thanks. IHEU has been in touch with me throughout these past three years. The campaign IHEU organized to secure my release, and Levi Fragell's visit to Pakistan and consultation with lawyers kept my morale up during the dark days. I would also like to thank the diplomats and government officials from many countries, and in particular, Norway, France, Switzerland, New Zealand, the United States, and the United Nations, who made representations on my behalf to the government of Pakistan, and those who have offered me a new home in the west.

Sincerely,

Dr M. Younus Shaikh, 5 January 2004

Pakistan's Infamous Islamic Blasphemy Laws

This article was written by Dr Younus Shaikh and mailed from the Central Jail, Rawalpindi, while he was awaiting the outcome of his appeal against the death sentence. Unlike his previous article 'The Gods of War', published under a pseudonym in the August 2003 issue of IHN, we are delighted to be able to publish the present article under his own name following his release from jail.

Like the infamous anti-female Pakistani Islamic Hudood ordinance (which prescribes capital punishment for victims of rape as well as for those involved in normal male-female sex with consent), the iniquitous Pakistani blasphemy laws are being pressed into service against women for resisting sexual harassment (*The Dawn*, 7 August, 2003).

Like the Hudood ordinance, the blasphemy laws are manifestly unjust man-made laws, projected as divine, in order to promote religio-political tyranny and hegemony. These fascist laws were the illegitimate creation of the Islamist Pakistani dictator General Zia ul Haq, who introduced these repressive and controversial laws without public discussion or approval by a constitutionally elected parliament. These illiberal laws continue to play havoc with the lives of countless Pakistanis and their families.

"The most shaming item listed in the Amnesty International Report (2002) is 'Abuse of Blasphemy Laws'. If there are black marks against the human rights record in this country (Pakistan), blasphemy laws must take the pride of place in the list... These laws are intrinsically susceptible to abuse and are systematically abused with impunity against [liberal Muslims and] members of minority religious communities [like Christians, Ahmadis, etc.]," wrote Ardeshir Cowasjee, a celebrated columnist in the Karachi daily, *The Dawn*, on 1 June, 2003. He goes on:

These laws ... are used with impunity against minority religious communities by those motivated by personal enmity, by those motivated by monetary material or political gain. One detestable fact is that accusations are normally accepted uncritically by the prosecuting authorities out of fear of threats, intimidation, injury or even loss of life should they fail to accept them. Also, those accused are often subjected to vile treatment because of the emotional manner in which charges are brought forward and publicized.



Younus Shaikh soon after his release.

Many lawyers and members of the lower judiciary exhibit open bias against those charged, and local lawyers often refuse to take up blasphemy cases. Trials are invariably highly disorderly and the courts are often packed with the local clergy and their illiterate brainwashed followers all baying for the blood of the accused.

... in 2002, with a war being waged against terrorism, in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, as records the AI Report, 'several men were sentenced to death for blasphemy, and others accused of blasphemy were killed, some in circumstances suggesting official complicity or acquiescence in the killings.' One man sentenced to death was later found to be a lunatic. This is quite usual, as it is never taken into account by the courts that no sane man, knowing the consequences, would even contemplate blasphemy. In June last year a prisoner jailed and sentenced to death for blasphemy was shot dead in jail and that was the end of the matter. In July, a man who had been sentenced to death for blasphemy, and freed on bail because of his mental state, was stoned to death by a mob on the call of a local Muslim cleric. The police remained inactive.

Mr Asghar Ali Engineer, the world-renowned Islamic scholar, had this to say (*The Dawn*, 13 July, 2003):

As a Muslim and a student of Islam, I don't consider death penalty for blasphemy as the correct thing... This blasphemy law is basically political. The gross misuse of this law is taking place against Muslims. Even indirect inferences are drawn and the accused is arrested under Blasphemy Law and two judges pass the death sentence under public pressure. It brings bad name to Islam. It has tarnished Pakistan's image very badly in the world. The world thinks that Pakistani Muslims have no tolerance.

To date, almost all cases registered under the iniquitous Blasphemy Laws have proved to be false and concocted out of malice, mischief, or misunderstanding. The trials have been unfair; defence lawyers have been harassed; trial courts have been under religious pressure or threat; the judgements of courts against those accused have been arbitrary, whimsical, biased, or based on mere conjecture or on the flimsiest foundation: naked and transparent injustice in the name of Islam, the sentences of death have been virtual juridical murders. The victims of this horrible injustice have been made to suffer long years of unnecessary, unjustifiable, and inhuman torture on mere allegations by Islamist mullahs and the Islamist state apparatus, denied even the most basic of legitimate facilities and needs even when suffering from disease, distress, or disability. Victims have been harassed, ridiculed, blackmailed, man-handled, threatened, and even murdered in prison.

Recently two women were indicted under the Blasphemy Laws in Lahore, one, allegedly, for resisting gang-rape by the police, the other for refusing illicit sex (adultery) with a neighbour. What a novel Pakistani way of earning heavenly bliss and spiritual elevation, and of glorifying Islam! Truly the menace of the Blasphemy and Hudood Laws, and their flagrant abuse, is the biggest and blackest stigma on the face of Islam, of Muslims, and of Pakistan.

*Younus Shaikh
Death cell, Central Jail, Rawalpindi
18 October, 2003*

The Fight for Democracy in Europe: Article 51 of the European Constitution

By Roy Brown

*Nearly 500 Humanist, Secularist and Freethought activists representing 36 organizations from 14 countries met in Paris on 6 December to discuss the implications of Article 51 of the draft European Constitution. The meeting, organized jointly by the French *Fédération Nationale de la Libre Pensée* and the British *National Secular Society*, and held under the aegis of the IHEU, sent a letter to the European Heads of Government asking for Article 51 to be deleted in its entirety from the draft Constitution.*

The meeting and letter brought the issue to greater prominence in Europe, with IHEU Executive Director, Babu Gogineni appearing on the UK Radio 4 Today programme, and a 20-minute broadcast on France Culture by Christian Eyschens, Secretary General of Libre Pensée. Transcripts of the broadcasts can be downloaded from the IHEU website.

The letter has been discussed at cabinet level in the Netherlands, while the Belgian government have agreed to oppose Article 51 following lobbying by the European Humanist Federation.

Secularists, Humanists, and Freethinkers breathed a sigh of relief when the European Summit held in Brussels in mid-December to approve a European Constitution ended in disarray over the issue of voting rights. Europe had been about to accept – with almost no debate – a role for the churches in European affairs unprecedented since the Enlightenment.

While there had been some debate about including a reference to Europe's 'Christian heritage' in the preamble to the Constitution, this debate had served as a smokescreen by the Vatican and its allies to divert attention from another provision of the draft Constitution with far more disturbing implications, namely Article 51. This article reads:

- 1. The Union respects and does not prejudice the status under national law of churches and religious associations or communities in the Member States.*
- 2. The Union equally respects the status of philosophical and non-confessional organisations.*
- 3. Recognising their identity and their specific contribution, the Union shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with these churches and organisations.*

The article is both dangerous and unnecessary. It is dangerous because Clause 1 enables the churches to ratchet up their influence state by state, and the European Union will be powerless to interfere. It therefore poses a major threat to democracy in Europe.

Considered on their own, the wording of clauses 2 and 3 may seem relatively anodyne, offering as they do apparently equal access and right of dialogue to both churches and non-confessional organizations alike. But this right must be viewed in the light of what has actually been happening in Brussels⁽¹⁾, and as part of the multi-pronged Vatican attempt to tighten its grip on both the

European Union and its member states. That strategy includes:

- the Concordats already signed by the Vatican with Poland, Slovakia and the German land of Brandenburg, and those currently under negotiation with a number of other European states, that will oblige even state-run schools to teach Catholic dogma as fact, and will give Catholic-run hospitals the right to refuse certain treatments for doctrinal rather than strictly medical reasons: such as contraception, sterilization, or even the supply of the 'morning after' pill to rape victims;
- the intensive lobbying by Vatican-linked NGOs in Brussels against women's reproductive health, against the provision of condoms by the EU for AIDS prevention programmes, against the legalization of abortion under any circumstances, against the legalization of voluntary euthanasia, against stem cell research that offers the only possible route to finding effective treatment for many genetic disorders – indeed, against virtually any socially progressive measures;
- the proposal⁽¹⁾ to formalize access by the churches to the European institutions, giving them the right to dialogue at Presidential level within the EC, the right to consult with the various departments of the EC at 'the pre-legislative stage', and the setting up of a church liaison office within the Commission;
- piling resources into lobbying virtually every department within the European Commission, and every elected MEP, on issues of particular concern to the Holy See which, we should remember, is not even a member of the European Union.⁽²⁾

Furthermore, Article 51 is unnecessary. Other articles of the Constitution, notably Articles 9, 10 and 46, already provide for freedom of religion and belief, and for dialogue between the European Union and civil society, of which the churches certainly form part. Article 51 was



Meeting in Paris, 6 December, against Article 51, organized by Libre Pensée and the UK's National Secular Society.

included at the behest of the churches to create a false distinction between the churches – implying something very special about their status – and civil society as a whole.

Article 51 is profoundly undemocratic in giving the churches a back door to influence European legislation before it even becomes the subject of democratic debate, a right in fact to subvert the democratic process, a right unheard of in any modern democracy. Why should representatives of the churches have a constitutional right of access to the offices of the European Commission that would be denied to any ordinary elected member of the European Parliament? The churches have clearly schemed and manoeuvred to have these privileges put in place, and have shown no qualms in starting to make full use of this unprecedented opportunity.

The churches argue that they should have special rights because of their special role in society. We need to examine this argument closely. Why should the churches have special rights under the European Constitution? Who do they represent? Certainly not the views of ordinary Christians, either Catholic or Protestant. Church attendance is in decline right across Europe. The churches are neither democratic nor representative. The majority of Catholics totally reject Vatican teaching on contraception, for example, and are deeply suspicious of its ultra-conservative policies on many other social issues. Similarly, the Protestant churches seem increasingly out of touch with the progressive views of the majority of their members.

But the churches claim special rights not as representatives of the people but as representatives of a higher power and, as such, claim a right to provide moral leadership.

Yet the positions of different churches on questions of morality are often in conflict one with another. Morality is a cultural construct – as can easily be seen by comparing Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Jewish and Humanist views of morality in Europe today. Furthermore, the moral teaching of the church has evolved over the years: few churches now argue that witches should be burnt, or that slavery is acceptable. If Christian morality has evolved in this way, how then can the churches claim to speak for an immutable God? But it is precisely this claim that has painted the Vatican into a corner, apparently condemned for ever to defend the indefensible, by placing a higher value on Papal authority than on compassion, humanity, or common sense. And as for the Vatican speaking for God, do even the most devout Catholics believe that their God is more concerned about Vatican policy on condoms than about the plight of millions of His children doomed to die from AIDS? What special constitutional rights can possibly be justified for those propounding such contemptible views? The churches speak neither for their members nor for the unchanging moral values of a benign deity, and their claims to moral leadership are exposed as self-serving humbug.

But *even if* their claims to providing moral leadership were valid, giving the churches back-door access to the institutions of the Union could not be justified. The



European Union is a democracy not a theocracy. The essence of democracy is universal representation. Every adult citizen of the European Union has a vote in national and European elections. This is as true for Catholics, Muslims, Protestants and Hindus as it is for teachers, doctors, engineers and railway workers. Why then should the churches be given additional, privileged, undemocratic rights of access to the European institutions? Even if they did actually represent Christian opinion, should Christians be doubly represented and the views of the churches given precedence over those of the elected members of the European Parliament?

The Churches are part of civil society and should be treated as such. Like any other institutions in civil society, they should have the right to let their views be known to the elected representatives of the people. And the European Commission should serve only the voters of Europe.

Whenever the issue of a Constitution for Europe reappears, Humanists and Secularists in every European country must be prepared to continue the fight against special privileges for organized religion in the political institutions of the Union.

Notes:

1. At the invitation of Dr Michael Weninger, Advisor on Religious Affairs to the President of the Commission, the Conference of European Churches and the Commission of the European Bishops Conferences have, in an exchange of letters, proposed four ways in which the 'regular dialogue' can be implemented including (and this is their phrase) 'pre-legislative' dialogue with the various advisors to the European Commission, 'Presidential-level' meetings, and the creation of a liaison office 'to facilitate contacts between the various Commission services and the churches and religious communities'. As far as we are aware, Dr Weninger has extended no equivalent invitation to any Secular, Freethought, or Humanist organization, nor have any such organizations sought special rights of access to the Commission.

2. A report which shows in detail the wide-ranging ambitions and activities of the Vatican and its allies in Europe has been published by Catholics For a Free Choice, the Washington-based Catholic women's organization. Called *Preserving Power and Privilege: The Vatican's Agenda in the European Union*, copies can be obtained from: Catholics for a Free Choice, 1436 U Street NW, Suite 301 Washington, DC 20009-3997 USA, telephone (001) 202 986-6093, or the text can be downloaded from their website: www.catholics4choice.org.

Paris, 6 December 2003

FROM: INTERNATIONAL HUMANIST AND ETHICAL UNION, 1 Gower Street, London WC1E 6HD
www.iheu.org

TO: Heads of Governments of the European Union and Members of the European Council
Your Excellencies,

We wish to communicate urgently the unanimous recommendation of nearly 500 representatives of secular, free thought and humanist organisations from 14 European countries meeting today in Paris, that Article 51 of the Draft European Constitution be deleted in its entirety.

The Human Rights experts and activists assembled under the aegis of the International Humanist and Ethical Union point out that in so far as Article 51 seeks to protect freedom of thought, conscience and religion, it is superfluous since these freedoms are already protected by Article 10.

The meeting expressed grave disquiet that clause 1 of Article 51, viz *The Union respects and does not prejudice the status under national law of churches and religious associations or communities in the Member States* would legitimise historical privileges. If Article 51 were to be accepted, the Union would be powerless to intervene, however undemocratic or repressive the terms of any historical or future agreements between the Church and a Member State might be. A privilege for some implies discrimination for others and violates the principle of state neutrality. European institutions have an obligation of fairness and justice towards all citizens.

The provision for dialogue under Article 51 is a repetition of a provision of the Charter of Fundamental Rights. However, it is significant that dialogue as envisaged by Article 51 will mean a subversion of the democratic process. All citizens of Europe enjoy adult franchise, and are represented through their elected political representatives. Double representation would subvert the democratic process, specially when the Union will seek to dialogue with Churches and other religious institutions which are not democratically organised.

In conclusion we wish to point out that adoption of article 51 of the proposed European Constitution will run contrary to the spirit of article 3 of the *UN Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination on the basis of Religion or Belief* which specifically states "discrimination between human beings on the grounds of religion or belief constitutes an affront to human dignity and a disavowal of the principles of the Charter of the United Nations, and shall be condemned as a violation of the human rights and fundamental freedoms".

We urge you to ensure at your forthcoming meeting in Rome that Article 51 be deleted in its entirety.



Roy Brown
President



Babu Gogineni
Executive Director

Defending Freedom of Conscience

By Matt Cherry

A Christian, a Jew, a Hindu, and a Humanist walk into a room together. This sounds like the beginning of a joke, but it is actually a description of what I do at the United Nations headquarters in New York twice a month. In May 2002 I was elected Secretary of the NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The committee works within the United Nations system to monitor, defend, and promote the fundamental human right to freedom of conscience.

I have worked on two broad goals within the committee: to improve the committee's effectiveness in advancing freedom of religion or belief, and to raise awareness within the human rights field of the rights of Humanists.

Humanists support the full panoply of human rights declared by the United Nations. But the only human right that protects Humanists as Humanists is the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRoB.) This was first stated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (see box overleaf). It requires all governments to allow people to practice and promote their life-stance and to suffer no disadvantage because of their beliefs. In practice, FoRoB is often invoked to support the work of Humanist groups and to defend the freedom and lives of individual Humanists.

Unfortunately, 'freedom of religion or belief' is all too often converted to 'religious freedom'. This linguistic

contraction frequently reflects the practice of ignoring or denying the rights of the non-religious. Human rights campaigners, as well as governments, need constant reminding that, in the words of the UN Commission on Human Rights, 'Article 18 protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief'.

Working in Partnership

The NGO Committee on FoRoB is made up of over thirty NGOs in consultative status with the United Nations. These members elect a bureau of seven officers to run the committee. In addition to me, the current bureau membership includes representatives of the International Association for Religious Freedom, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocesan Council, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the United Methodist Church, the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Although these organizations have radically divergent positions on many issues, when it comes to freedom of conscience we all work very effectively in partnership together.

The committee holds an average of eight speaker meetings a year in which political, religious and human rights leaders explore issues surrounding freedom of belief. Its biggest event is the Annual Day for Freedom of Religion or Belief held every November.

While the public meetings are valuable, I feel the most important work of the committee is networking and lobbying. The committee is developing its role as a clearing-house and advocate for freedom of conscience within the UN and across the world. We work closely with the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, suggesting issues and contacts when he visits countries to examine their respect for freedom of conscience. We are also increasing our efforts to work with other committees within the UN, and with non-UN groups dedicated to advancing freedom of religion or belief around the world.

These two aspects – the organizational networking and the public events – came together in the 2003 Annual Day for Freedom of Religion or Belief. The meeting was titled ‘Partners for Progress on Freedom of Religion or Belief’ and brought together key organizations working for FoRoB around the world.

The two keynote speakers for the event were David Young, Executive Director of the United States State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom, and Babu Gogineni, Executive Director of IHEU. The audience included not only NGO representatives and UN officials, but also several national ambassadors to the UN, plus the ambassadors from the Vatican and the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

Defending the Non-Religious

The 2003 Annual Day for Freedom of Religion or Belief provided an ideal platform to promote IHEU’s new campaign for the separation of religion and state. It also gave an opportunity to emphasize that the rights of Humanists and the non-religious require equal protection to the rights of the religious.

The United States government, through the State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom and also the quasi-autonomous US Commission on International Religious Freedom, has made ‘religious freedom’ its primary human rights focus in international affairs. The remit of these agencies is based on the various UN declarations of freedom of religion or belief. Unfortunately, as their titles indicate, these bodies tend to focus on ‘religious freedom’ to the exclusion of the non-religious.

In his talk at the Annual Day for Freedom of Religion or Belief, David Young focused almost exclusively on the importance of religious faith and religious freedom. Abandoning his prepared speech, Babu Gogineni responded to Mr Young’s presentation with a passionate defence of the Humanist viewpoint and the right of the non-religious and non-theistic to enjoy the same freedoms and protections as the religious. In the question-and-answer session, David Young responded positively to Babu’s arguments for the rights of Humanists and the non-religious.

“Broadly, in the field of Freedom of Religion or Belief, the challenge in the modern world, as Humanists see it, is to establish a tolerant environment for free inquiry where all life stances, whether secular or religious, can find room for flourishing and peaceful competition. For Humanists to preserve the equal freedoms and liberties they are entitled to along with the religious, freedom from religion in the public sphere is crucial...because what Humanists reject, they do not want to be imposed on them either by the State or by individuals in society.”

From Babu Gogineni’s speech at the UN NGO Committee Meeting

Freedom of Religion or Belief

The United Nations first stated the right to freedom of religion or belief in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948): *Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.*

This right was stated in greater detail in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), which declares:

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.
2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.
3. Freedom to manifest one’s religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.
4. The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.

Finally, in 1981, the United Nations adopted a full declaration in defence of freedom of religion or belief, titled the Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. The UN appointed a Special Rapporteur to submit annual reports on how UN member states comply with the 1981 Declaration.

You Can Help

As IHEU expands its work at the United Nations, the right to freedom of religion or belief will continue to be an important area of activity. There are several ways IHEU member organizations can help this work and also use it to defend Humanist rights in their own countries. For example, they can:

- Publicize the right to freedom of religion or belief, and its protection of both the religious and the non-religious.
- Organize conferences and research projects to explore and advance these rights.
- Join coalitions working to defend freedom of conscience.
- Collect information on violations of the freedom of conscience and submit it to the UN.

Information about violations of the freedom of religion or belief can be submitted directly to the office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (see <http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu2/2/special-complaints.htm> for more details). Humanist complainants may also contact me (at Matt@HumanistStudies.org) or the IHEU office for assistance.

Matt Cherry is Executive Director of the Institute for Humanist Studies and an IHEU representative at the UN.

IHEU Women's Conference: Empowering Women

IHEU organized a successful International Conference entitled 'Empowering Women', on 15 and 16 November 2003, at Conway Hall, London, with participants from 17 countries. Men and women participating in the conference discussed the main global problems of women today, and agreed that empowerment of women was the route to achieving the United Nations Millennium Goals which 189 countries have pledged to achieve by 2015.

The conference examined the health, sexual, and reproductive rights of women, discussed progress in women's civil and political rights, and remedies to violence against women. The conference highlighted the need to prioritize education of girls and the economic independence of women as critical steps for women to break through the vicious cycle of poverty. In view of the extremely conservative agenda pursued by many religious institutions, complete separation of religion and state was found to be an important precondition for progress in the status of women.



Annie Laurie Gaylor addresses the conference.

The Conference urged all the member organizations of IHEU to put gender on their political agenda; to look at the policies and practices of their own organizations to ensure that the gender imbalance is addressed; and to ensure that the voices of women are both heard and listened to, and that the leadership of women is encouraged, sustained and developed.

The Conference recommended that within the Humanist movement, the issues of women's empowerment must be mainstreamed and agreed that in order to promote this agenda within the Humanist movement, a Humanist Women's Empowerment Network should be set up:

- To promote women's rights, empowerment and development within the UN system and the international community;
- To challenge women's subservience in the world's religions;
- To promote and encourage Humanist women to participate in their national women's lobby and governmental agencies;
- To put gender on the agenda of Humanist organizations;
- To promote and encourage women to take leadership positions within their national Humanist organizations.

This network will operate through the IHEU website, within IHEU member organizations and will hold meetings at IHEU Congresses, annual General Assemblies and other IHEU events.

Babu Gogineni



Dr Sabita Mishra.

Conference Resolution

The IHEU International Conference Empowering Women, meeting on 15 and 16 November 2003 at Conway Hall, London, at which participants from 17 countries (Belgium, England, France, Germany, India, Iran, Iraq, Nepal, Norway, Poland, Scotland, Slovakia, Sweden, Switzerland, Syria, The Netherlands, and the United States) were assembled, unanimously passed the following resolution:

This Conference expresses its grave disquiet that despite the claims of the government of the United States that the invasions and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq were carried out, at least in part, to liberate the people of those countries, the draft Constitution for Afghanistan reintroduces Islamic law in a form that falls far short of internationally accepted standards of human rights. The Conference is also deeply concerned that in Iraq, the American Administration is reported to be prepared to accept Islam as the state religion.

The Conference deplores the reintroduction of an Islamic constitution in Afghanistan while the memory of the brutality of the Taliban is still fresh. The Conference expresses its dismay that the Administration would countenance the introduction of a state religion in Iraq where none existed before the occupation by coalition forces. The principle of the separation of religion and state, a defining characteristic of the Constitution of the United States of America, is a necessary condition to guarantee freedom of conscience for all citizens, and to safeguard the welfare of women in any state.

The Conference urgently requests the government of the United States to ensure that the new constitutions for Afghanistan and Iraq conform to the standards set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Women's Sexual and Reproductive Rights

By Diana Brown

Human sexuality, like all animal sexuality, evolved primarily to enable us to reproduce. We have a sex drive, which in many individuals is very strong, independently of any desire for reproduction. Sexual rights refer to the right to express one's sexuality, while reproductive rights refer to the right to manage one's reproductive processes and their outcome.

The whole field of human sexuality is fraught with powerful emotion. Societies without exception seem to need to control sexuality in various ways. A large part of most religions has to do with sexuality. As Humanists from different cultures, it is important that we question our assumptions and try to break free from any religious conditioning to which we may have been subjected.

There is little doubt that the acquisition of sexual and reproductive rights does empower women. Historically, and still in many societies today, women are seen primarily in terms of their sexual and reproductive functions. Men, of course, have sexuality and play their part in reproduction, but they are not usually defined by these functions.

Who Owns My Body?

Various answers have been offered to this question: God, another person, the community, or I myself. The choice of answer is of profound importance with regard to the sexual and reproductive rights of women. Depending on which answer we look at, there are supplementary questions that arise from it. Let us look at each answer in turn.

1. *If God*, how do we know what God wants for my body? There are of course many who claim to speak to us in God's name, but how can we assess their claims?
2. *If another person*, how and by what right is this person appointed? Are there limits to this person's rights over my body? Can this person assign to another his/her rights over my body?
We perhaps ought to mention here the different kinds of ownership that may exist. While a child, are you owned by your parents? Can you be owned by a pimp or brothel keeper? Can you be owned by a spouse?
3. *If the Community*, how is it constituted? Am I allowed to leave it? Who speaks for the Community? How are the interests of the Community determined? Does the Community have equal control of all members' bodies? What advantages do members of the Community gain as a result of ceding control of their bodies? (There are applications here also for euthanasia and abortion.) Is there any reason for objecting to efforts by the Community to influence any otherwise free choices that I might make?
In practice, we always cede some rights to a community in order to receive some benefits. We may, for example, cede the right of private revenge in order to have an efficient and fair legal system. We

can all benefit from such a system. What is a different question is whether we should be obliged to cede rights for a particular individual's or group's benefit. Should a woman be obliged to cover large portions or even all of her body in order to avoid provoking lustful thoughts in men? Countries that don't require this find other ways to protect women from sexual interference.

Then again, a society may be concerned about the cumulative effect of decisions about reproduction. China has attempted to coerce its citizens to have small families because of concern about overpopulation. Militaristic regimes, on the other hand, often feel weakened by low birth rates and encourage or even coerce people into having more children. We must ask: is either of these positions legitimate?

4. *If I myself*, do I harm others by making free choices for my body? In societies where marriage is considered of great value, it is sometimes argued that homosexuality weakens the institution of marriage to the detriment of society as a whole. If a foetus is considered to be a human being, then abortion is harmful to another human being.

As Humanists, I would assume that we would choose the fourth answer when considering rights, although we may to some extent lean towards the third answer when considering ethics.

Sexual and Reproductive Rights

What rights relate to sexuality and reproduction?

1. The right to own one's own body. This includes the right to decide whether, when and with whom to have sexual experiences, always provided that such experiences are not harmful to another. Most of the other rights may be considered to flow from this primary right.
2. The right to adequate education and information about sex and reproduction. Quite simply, ignorance can kill.
3. The right to decouple sexual experiences from reproduction. This includes access to the means of controlling one's fertility, in turn implying access to efficient contraception and related information.
4. The right to choose whether or not to marry.
5. The right to choose one's marital partner.
6. The right to decide whether and when to have children or to cease childbearing.
7. The right to end one's marriage for adequate reason and with adequate safeguards for the welfare of the other partner and any children. In some cultures, men have this right but women don't, and they can be denied access to their children after divorce.
8. The right to a reasonable standard of sexual and

reproductive health care. In many countries, pregnancy and childbirth still threaten the lives of women and their children as they did in nineteenth-century Europe and America. In my opinion, this right should imply a right to safe abortion. Many women die every year as a result of dangerous abortions. Criminalizing abortion doesn't save babies; it kills mothers.

9. The right to joint responsibility for children born to a marriage. This is important both within marriage and after divorce. Children should not be deprived of access to one parent except in very special circumstances.
10. Protection from sexual abuse while a minor unable to exercise all the other rights. This one is very important. Girls may reach puberty, but that does not mean that their bodies are entirely ready for intercourse or pregnancy. Early pregnancy is responsible for much severe ill health in girls and women. Young girls are also more vulnerable to sexually transmitted infection. In some countries young girls are forced into prostitution or sex-slavery. In some others they are forced into marriage. In still others they are largely unprotected against rape. We should also consider what rights, if any, minors ought to have to express their sexuality.

To this list we should perhaps add two more:

11. Protection from genital mutilation. Worldwide, large numbers of baby boys are circumcised, but this is a minor infliction compared with female genital mutilation. This does not arise in most societies, but it is estimated that 80 to 135 million girls and women around the world have undergone it, and there are some two million girls at risk each year. It can destroy a woman's ability to enjoy sex and can lead to severe health problems. In Ethiopia 85% of girls suffer from this cruel practice and in Somalia, 95%. It is also practised in 23 other African countries, in four Arab countries, and in Indonesia and Malaysia, and is also carried out in some immigrant communities in Europe and America. An international campaign is being waged to put an end to this practice.
12. Protection from other forms of violence against the person. Obviously, no-one should be subjected to violent attacks, but women are particularly vulnerable and it is thought that about one woman in three worldwide has suffered from this scourge. Often violence occurs within the home and is considered normal and acceptable. Outside the home, young girls in some countries are often subject to violent sexual attacks, carrying a risk of unwanted pregnancy or infection with sexually transmitted diseases as well as other damage.

Not all these rights are equally recognized worldwide, particularly for women. It is also obvious that they sit within the wider context of general human rights. Difficulties in according these rights to women are often related to the overall status of women. Where the status of women is low, they are most likely to be viewed primarily in a sexual or reproductive capacity.

Who are the enemies of women's sexual and reproductive rights?

Conservative people in most societies feel uneasy about growing freedoms. With greater freedom, some abuse and irresponsible behaviour is likely, after all. Reasonable people can often be led to question their initial assumptions. If, however, their conservatism is backed up by religion, then we have a bigger problem: the conservatives can hide behind a god or gods. Religion seems always to be opposed to the human rights of women and is usually interested in controlling their sexual and reproductive capabilities.

On the international stage, the biggest enemies are the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, many conservative Muslim religious leaders, and fundamentalist Protestants, particularly those in America, because of their influence in the world's only superpower.

For centuries, the Catholic Church has had big problems with sexuality. It is a patriarchal organization that views sexuality with disgust and prefers to see women in a subordinate position. It is run by a totally male priesthood that is celibate, at least in theory. It limits sex to married couples, regards its primary purpose as procreation, and is of course strongly opposed to contraception and abortion. The Catholic Church has wielded its enormous power and international influence to deny access to contraception and abortion, even in cases where one partner is HIV-positive, and spread the dangerous myth that condoms are ineffective at preventing the spread of HIV.

The problem with much of Islam is not so much a specific attack on women's reproductive rights as a general attack on most of the human rights of women. Many Muslim women suffer from the basic problem of not really owning their own bodies. Some Muslim countries allow child marriage from as young as nine, and permit polygyny. Sex education is not usually allowed. Men may be able to beat their wives and rape may be impossible to prove under the conditions demanded by Sharia law. Women's entitlement to divorce and custody of children is limited. Abortion is usually frowned upon, but contraception is often allowed within marriage.

Fundamentalist Protestants are totally opposed to abortion and, together with the Catholic Church in the USA, are mainly responsible for the de-funding of the UN Population Fund on the totally spurious grounds that UNFPA uses the money to support forced abortions in China. They also oppose sex education and believe that unmarried teenagers should not have access to contraceptives either to prevent pregnancy or to protect against infection. It seems that some of President Bush's promised money for fighting HIV/AIDS in developing countries is to go to programmes that provide no condoms but simply advocate sexual abstinence.

We must challenge the human rights abuses and the misinformation spread by the enemies of sexual and reproductive freedoms. We need to work for a world where girls and women understand and enjoy their sexuality, own their own bodies and make reproductive decisions freely and responsibly.

Diana Brown has written widely on issues surrounding reproductive health, population, and development. She was a board member and chair of the UK organization Population Concern (now Interact Worldwide), and a co-founder of the Dutch organization World Population Foundation.

Political Islam and the Secularist Liberationist Women's Movement in Iran

By Azam Kamguian

The situation of Iranian women presents a remarkable and even contradictory picture to the external observer. On the one hand, we see a complete system of gender apartheid, including fiercely misogynistic laws imposed on them by the Islamic Republic in segregation in all aspects of civil and public life, in legalized polygyny, in divorce and women's lack of rights in child custody, in the Islamic penal code regarding women (including stoning to death for sex outside marriage), and in the mandatory veil. On the other hand, we see women actively participate in many aspects of social, economic, and cultural life.

How should we interpret this picture? How can religious oppression be compatible with the presence of women everywhere? Should we say, as many academics and western mainstream media do, that this is due to Islamic and indigenous cultural values which, according to them, have promoted and protected women's rights?

Some argue that perceptions of religious oppression of women originate from the colonial and racist attitudes of Western countries and from Eurocentrism. They say that the veil (*Hijab*) empowers and liberates women. They tell us that women are actively engaged in public and social life because Islam and the indigenous culture are compatible with women's needs and expectations, contrary to the relatively modern values of the pre-revolutionary period. These cultural relativists tell us that women's rights and freedoms in Iran should not be defined according to universal concepts.

Others tell us that the so-called Islamic feminists who seek a different interpretation of Koranic verses are the initiators and agents of this advancement, and have the duty to lead Iranian women's struggle for liberation. All these interpretations are based on the notion that women's rights are not universal, and that a secular government is not the precondition for women's liberation in Iran.

This portrayal of Iranian women under the Islamic Republic gained a higher profile when Khatami became president. His smiling face, his ability to speak English and some modifications in his religious dressing were interpreted as signs of the dawn of freedom and women's rights in Iran. It seems that if Khatami did not exist, western powers and their media, eager to reopen political and trade relations with Iran, would have invented him.

What, then, is the reality? At the threshold of the 1979 Iranian revolution, women's massive participation in the public sphere was an undeniable reality. Iran's transition into a capitalist society, and the modernization reforms initiated by Mohammad Reza Shah in the 1960s accelerated women's participation in education and the labour force. Two decades later, women were massively engaged in many aspects of economic and social life as workers, teachers, actresses, doctors, and clerks. Nevertheless discrimination against women remained. Women had many hopes and expectations of the 1979 revolution. But the Iranian revolution was defeated and repressed by the Islamic movement.

The past 24 years have been some of the darkest in the memory of Iranian women. The Islamic regime, the

first established government of political Islam, has brought nothing but repression, torture, and death. Women were amongst the very first targets attacked by the Islamic Republic. With Khomeini's pronouncements on the veil, immense outbursts of anger were expressed by women on the streets on International Women's Day in 1979. This anger was not simply because of their rejection of the veil. They saw in the imposition of the veil a much greater implied threat. And it proved to be so.

Political Islam is a major force that has imposed serious setbacks on women's lives in the region. It is a political movement that came to the fore against the secular and progressive movements for liberation and egalitarianism. In Iran, the Sudan, Pakistan and Afghanistan, Islamic regimes proceeded to transform women's homes into prison houses. The confinement of women, their exclusion from many fields of work and education, and their brutal treatment became the law of the land. In addition, the misogynist rhetoric they have let loose in the social sphere implicitly sanctions male violence towards women.

Iranian Women Fight Back

As the first victims of political Islam, women also became the pioneer force fighting against political Islam in Iran. In fact, the post-revolutionary period in Iran has seen an extraordinary gender awareness among Iranian women. Women's resistance against Islamic laws has been a daily fact of life. The penalty for breaking the rules of segregation and *Hijab* has been insult, cash fines, expulsion and deprivation from education, arrest, imprisonment, beating, and flogging. Tens of thousands of women, the great majority born after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, have defied the rules and have been attacked by Islamic moral squads with fists, knives, cutters, and acid.

Women in Iran have struggled to open spaces and make opportunities for themselves. They have organized associations for the defence of women and children's rights. They campaign against Islamic and traditional images of women dictated and portrayed by the Islamic cultural authorities in films, theatres, newspapers and magazines. They are actively involved in clandestine political struggle. Inch by inch, they have succeeded in pushing back the offensive of the Islamic regime, re-appropriating spheres of public life that were lost immediately after the revolution. Their success in forcing the government to remove, at least on paper, the ban on certain fields of higher education is a case in point. Women have succeeded in placing their plight at the centre of politics in Iran.

In contrast to these efforts, the trend of Islamic or Muslim feminism so highly publicized in the West has been of little significance within Iran. With their efforts to improve the situation of women by limited reform and reinterpretation of Koranic verses, they are the political allies of the so-called reformist faction of the Islamic government, a faction whose agenda for shaping a tolerable Islamic regime has been badly defeated in recent years.

The fact is that Iranian society has changed dramatically and deeply since 1979. The movement for secularism and atheism, for modern ideas and culture, for individual freedom, for women's liberation and civil liberties has been widespread and deep. Women and the youth are the champions of this battle – a battle that threatens the basic pillars of the Islamic system. The most hopeful signs and the most remarkable stimulus for change continue to come directly from Iranian women both in Iran and in exile. Any change in Iran will not only affect the lives of people living in Iran, but will have a significant impact on the region and worldwide.

Women's rights are universal and women's liberation can only be achieved under an egalitarian, progressive

and secularist form of government. These are the basic prerequisites of women's liberation in the Middle Eastern countries. Secularism has been and continues to be a prerequisite for women's liberation. Our objectives must be the complete separation of religion from state; the elimination of religion from law and from education; and the declaration of religion as a private affair for individuals.

Secularism is not only realizable, but also, after the experiences of Iran, Afghanistan, the Sudan, and Algeria, an urgent and pressing need and demand of the people of the region.

Azam Kamgouian is an Iranian writer and activist in exile.

Women's Rights in Clerical Slovakia

By Viera Faragulová

Despite the measures passed after the 1989 'velvet revolution', which should have secured a democratic civil society, the state policy of Slovakia has sanctioned the dominance of Catholicism, supporting it financially, institutionally, and with propaganda.

The continuous animosity of the Catholic Church against women is necessarily linked with this transformation of Slovakia into a Catholic state. The interior minister V. Palko claimed at the Republican Congress of the Christian Democratic Party in 2003: "In western civilization a cultural war is under way, at which the leftist liberals want to wipe out Christian civilization. They want to enforce on us a perverse view of the pillars of society, which are the family and marriage. They doubt the right to preserve human life at its beginning equally as at its end."

A dangerous row between governmental coalition partners arose when parliament rejected the abortion law proposed by Christian Democrats and instead passed another, more liberal law proposed by Alliance of the New Citizens (ANO) and its chairman P. Rusko. The Christian Democratic Party appealed immediately to the Constitutional Court. The church threatened the president of the Republic and parliamentarians with excommunication.

The chairman of the Bishops Conference, Bishop František Tondra, proclaimed that passing of the amendment had been a treachery committed on the electorate. "In my opinion they have been excommunicated," he said, adding that the excommunication can be reversed by penitence. It is clear that the Catholic Church aspires to an unchallenged right to dictate to the parliamentarians of Slovakia. The president, Rudolf Schuster, was himself intimidated to the extent that he finally did not sign the new law, despite his alleged agreement with its content.

This episode illustrates just one aspect of the hostile policy of Slovakia against women and their rights. Many others remain unnoticed, including demands to deprive women of their equal status in society by claiming that the duty of women is limited to maintaining the household. Such tendencies show themselves in the lack of equal opportunities for women in terms of employment and salary.

According to the most recent investigation by the statistical bureau, in 1996 women's salaries reached 74.9% of men's salaries; in 2001 it was 74.1%; and in 2002 it had dropped to 71.7%. Substantial differences between men's and women's salaries were noticeable especially in banking and communications professions. The situation for women in employment is clearly deteriorating.

The picture in political participation, one of the most important aspects of citizenship, is no better. Compared to other European countries, women in Slovakia were granted the right to vote relatively early, immediately after the formation of the Czechoslovak Republic in October 1918. Yet the right of women to be elected and to participate in the formulation of government policy has yet to be satisfactorily secured or implemented. Before 1989 quotas were in place requiring a 30% proportion of women on lists of election candidates. As a result, more than 20% of parliamentarians were women. After 1990, the figure was 12%. After intense public debate on equal opportunities and pressure from non-governmental organizations, the figure rose after the 2002 elections, but only to 19.3%. And women's participation in the executive branch has declined after these elections. The new cabinet does not have a single female minister. By comparison, in most EU member states the ratio of women in the cabinet exceeds one third, and in many it is approaching parity. The situation is the same or even worse at the regional level of the state administration and in regional and municipality administration.

Slovakia is just one example illustrating how the establishment of 'Christian values' in state policy poses a serious danger to women's rights. European NGOs seeking the implementation of real democracy should unite and oppose these tendencies, especially potent in candidate states to the EU. These states should be pressurized to bring their legislature and state policy in line with the requirements to safeguard equal rights for all citizens, regardless of gender and other distinguishing characteristics, before they are admitted to the EU. Stop discrimination!

Viera Faragulová is a member of the Prometheus Society of Slovakia.

Poland: Transformation into a Patriarchal State

By *Katarzyna Szumlewicz*

The former political system of Poland, so-called socialism, had done a lot for women. They were granted equal access to employment and education and were partly relieved of family burdens thanks to the well-developed network of pre-school nurseries and day-care centres. Abortion had been lawful in Poland and family planning had been promoted much earlier than it was in France or Germany. These regulations and policies were accompanied by a progressive divorce law and effective policies aimed at combating domestic violence. All these achievements are hardly questionable, regardless of one's attitude to socialist ideas and reality.

Yet while giving women high social status and rights that they can hardly hope to enjoy today, socialism failed to recognize the views and demands of women themselves. There were no independent women's organizations, let alone feminist groups. This failure allowed conservative attitudes to remain, constantly reinforced by the Catholic Church, which, despite its virtual absence from the media and educational system, still exerted great ideological influence.

In 1989, after the breakdown of socialism in Poland, western commentators expected the newly introduced democracy to bring rapid improvement in the situation of women. After all, feminist organizations were now fully legal and wide recognition of human rights should contribute to the emancipation of the oppressed groups. Yet the facts proved otherwise.

Instead of being granted more rights by the democratic state, women were soon deprived of those rights and liberties they had enjoyed so far. First, abortion was suppressed. But that was not all. Despite the promotion of full families with many children, many nurseries were closed down and the remaining few introduced high fees. As a result, women with large families had to leave their jobs and take care of their numerous offspring at home. It is not surprising that despite the ban on abortion, expensive contraceptives, and high availability of Viagra, the rate of natural growth in Poland has collapsed.

As the ultimate illustration of women's position, the Polish parliament did not even accept the motion to vote on a law granting equal status to men and women. The arguments used by right-wing politicians invoked 'natural differences in the vocation of men and women'. Conservative MPs ridiculed the proposal to avoid gender stereotypes in school textbooks. They argued that such efforts might result in boys experiencing a sexual identity crisis. Such are the appalling inequalities between men and women in Poland today. Can future developments take another direction, more favourable for women?

Despite the views of many Polish feminists of 'Solidarity' origin, the current situation of women does not contradict the logic of transformation – it follows the same path. As the revolution of 1989 was directed against a system that was considered left-wing, all elements of the left political agenda were rejected – including gender equality. Later the taxes of the rich were lowered, the labour code was amended to

strengthen the position of employers and the social welfare system was gradually curtailed. Poland was being rebuilt as a class society characterized by vast inequalities in wealth and economic power.

This purpose was fulfilled in record time. Although the official goal of the neoliberal policy was to curtail unemployment, the number of jobless has been growing throughout the whole period of transformation. Women have suffered particularly as the unemployment rate soared to 21.2%. They also make up the majority of those on low incomes and those relying on the welfare system.

Apart from conservative liberal ideology, the second most important factor shaping Polish transformation has been the extremely conservative Polish Catholic Church. The Church, powerful already in the socialist period, has grown to enormous proportions since 1989. Today, virtually no important government decision is taken without its consent. At the Church's demand, religious instruction was introduced into school curricula and it soon became compulsory. Officially, students of other faiths or non-believers, may attend ethics classes, but lack of funding prevents most schools from employing teachers of ethics. The syllabi of other subjects, including history and biology, have also been prepared in consultation with bishops. Sex education was replaced in school curricula by unambiguously Catholic 'education for family life'. Dangerous misinformation, such as the idea that condoms let through the HIV virus, is rife.

The Polish Catholic Church is particularly conservative. It has not given birth to any movement comparable to Latin American 'Liberation Theology' or North American 'Catholics for a Free Choice'. The image of women promoted by the Polish Catholic Church harks back to that of the Middle Ages.

Liberal ideology only seemingly opposes this backward view. While wealthy women are able to free themselves from domestic chores, they form a tiny minority, and moreover their freedom is secured by the exploitation of other women – often underpaid and underinsured Ukrainian home helps and babysitters. Far from real emancipation, it amounts at most to limited economic advancement within a steadfastly patriarchal order.

Polish democracy is a world without women. And it is little recompense to them to know that others, too, such as the male unemployed and pensioners, have been deprived of influence. A powerful coalition of financial and religious elites has been responsible for this situation. Their influence on government policy has been evident in the failure to repeal the ban on abortion, the cutting of social welfare benefits, and the commitment to introduce a reference to God into the preamble of the Constitution of the European Union. Without undermining the power of this coalition, the achievement of women's rights, freedom, and dignity seem unattainable.

Katarzyna Szumlewicz is a member of the Polish Humanist Association.

Engendering Change in Scotland

By Joan Gibson

Scotland is a small country with a population of 5 million. For nearly 300 years we had been united to England and Wales while retaining our own legal and education systems and a Scottish church which was separate from the state. We have an independence movement focused on the Scottish Nationalist Party. The political position of Scotland was akin to the position of women the world over, and Scottish men resented their powerlessness and disenfranchisement.

The Establishment of Engender

From 1987 onwards, Scottish women held a series of conferences, building a consensus for change. Women from Iceland, Ireland, and Scandinavia shared their experiences and inspired us. We were right at the heart of the movement for devolution. We recognized that to improve the position of women in Scotland we needed to change the political culture.

In the early 1990s, against this background of constitutional change, a group of about 20 women established Engender – a research and campaigning organization for Scottish women. With seed funding allowing financial independence, Engender was launched as a public company limited by guarantee on the 75th anniversary of British women gaining the vote in 1918.

Putting Scottish Women in the Picture

Scottish women were invisible in official statistics, so our priority was to conduct a Gender Audit. The first of seven yearly audits, compiled voluntarily by women academics, was published in 1994 and purchased by libraries, academic institutions, campaigning organizations, and government departments. The Audit won respect for its integrity, acclaim for Engender and, in 1996, a European Award. The task of compiling the audit has now been passed to the Scottish Executive. An Engender founder was appointed the first Equality Ombudsman.

“Gender statistics,” Simone Lindsten from Sweden had told us, “are the gunpowder of emancipation”. These statistics revealed for the first time the true situation of Scottish women in all aspects of civil and public life. They showed that Scottish women still had a long way to go to achieve equality and safety. They gave us a baseline from which to campaign for change and to measure progress.

Funding and Development

The development of Engender relied on the voluntary effort of many women and at times its existence seemed under threat. It all began with a shoebox in someone's attic, then a corner of the office of a women's organization. Today, Engender rents its own office in central Edinburgh and employs several staff and project workers.

We have core funding from the Scottish Executive and project funding from the National Lotteries and European Community Funds, the Equal Opportunities Commission and Oxfam GB. Engender has set up a Women's Fund for Scotland with a 4-year grant from the Scottish Executive and matching funds from donors to establish an endowment fund and make grants to any group seeking to support and empower women.

Scottish Devolution: a Great Opportunity

When the Labour Party won the UK elections in 1997 with a manifesto including a referendum for Scottish devolution, the hope of a Scottish Parliament became an achievable goal. Engender joined with other women's organizations in campaigning and in working through the Scottish Constitutional Convention to shape the future of Scotland.

A 50/50 campaign called for equal representation of women. The UN Charter on the Rights of Women makes provision for ‘temporary special measures’ to redress the inequality experienced by women. However the British Government would do no more than urge parties to ‘have equal opportunity in mind’, for fear of contravening the Sex Discrimination Act and the European Equal Treatment Directive. Ultimately only the Scottish Labour Party committed to 50/50.

Women into Parliament

The greatest hurdle a woman has to overcome is the first – having enough confidence to put herself forward for selection by her party. Engendering Change courses help to give women the confidence and skills needed to stand for election.

Scottish campaigning resulted in the number of Scottish women MPs sent to Westminster increasing from 5 to 12 out of 72 in 1997. Overall the UK Parliament had 18% women MPs. Celebrations on achieving 37% women Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) overlooked the fact that we had not achieved 50/50. But we had made a breakthrough – we had broken the UK mould, and crossed the threshold of a critical mass of 1/3, which can make a difference to the body.

In elections this year, despite the petering out of the 50/50 campaign and the focus on the war in Iraq, the proportion of women in parliament increased to 39.5%.

Traditionally, women's voices have been stronger at the local level. Local government has a great impact on women's lives both as service users and employees. Nevertheless only a fifth of local government councillors are women. Efforts are being made to improve the situation in the local elections due in 2007 which, like the Scottish Parliamentary elections, will be by proportional representation.

Consolidation

On our 10th anniversary the two other campaigning organizations for Scottish Women – the Scottish Joint Action Group and Women's Forum Scotland – amalgamated with Engender, making it the single umbrella organization for women in Scotland, with representation on the Women's National Commission which advises the British Government, and the European Women's Lobby. Networking has been at the core of Engender's activities. We intend to go on engendering change and empowering women in Scotland.

Joan Gibson is a member of the Humanist Society of Scotland. Email: Joanpgibson@aol.com. See also www.humanism-scotland.org.uk, and Engender's website, www.engender.org.uk, for information on programmes and the Gender Audit 2000.

No Gods – No Masters

By Annie Laurie Gaylor

Annie Laurie Gaylor is a co-founder of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (www.ffrf.org), a nationwide United States group based in Madison, Wis. She is author of *Woe to the Women: The Bible Tells Me So*, *Betrayal of Trust: Clergy Abuse of Children*, and editor of the anthology *Women Without Superstition: No Gods – No Masters*. What follows is an edited version of her keynote speech at the Women's Conference.

I salute the work of the many feminist Humanists here, male and female, for their dedication to empowering women, and the IHEU for giving women Humanists from around the world a chance to meet and share concerns and strategy. I have been asked to draw together some of the themes of the conference with my own research on women and freethought and comments on feminist issues in the United States today.

In talking about the status of women in the United States, it is instructive to compare the rights of women today with the status of women in 1848, when freethinker Elizabeth Cady Stanton first called for the right to vote and sparked a revolution for women.

Stanton never lived to exercise her right to vote under the suffrage amendment which she proposed and composed, but it was finally passed as a constitutional amendment in 1920, the only constitutional guarantee explicitly covering women.

As a young woman, Stanton was barred from enrolling in university. Today, women form a majority on US college campuses.

We still have no Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to our constitution, although it was first proposed in 1923. The religious lobbies of the Catholic, fundamentalist, and Mormon churches defeated the Equal Rights Amendment. We worked hard on that front in the 1970s and early 1980s, and came so close. Such simple justice, who could object? 'Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.'

Many of the ERA's guarantees are law today, although the situation varies from state to state. But these rights are not enshrined in our constitution, where they belong.

We heard about the impressive political gains of Scandinavian, Scottish and British women. The US has never elected a woman president, while currently there are 17 female heads of state worldwide. Only 13% of our powerful US Senate is female, and 14% of the very large House of Representatives. Women fill about 22% of state legislative seats. Although we have recently lost some ground, we have made definite progress since the rise of the feminist movement in the 1970s. Nevertheless the US ranks 59th out of 181 nations in which women are elected to national legislatures.

Abortion is still legal in the United States, but it hangs by a swing vote of our United States Supreme Court. Feminists have just gone to court to halt the so-called partial-birth abortion ban passed by Congress and signed into law in November, whose over-broadness threatens the right to legal abortion under the Supreme Court's historic 1973 decision in the case *Roe v. Wade*. There is a generation of young women who have grown up since

abortion was legalized in the US.

Now, I am fearful that my 14-year-old daughter may soon witness the recriminalization of abortion. We don't ever want to go back to those dark days.

The Catholic Church is the single largest denomination in the United States and has great influence. Catholics and Protestant fundamentalists are working, not always

together but in concert, to attack secular gains, to attain public aid for religiously segregated education, to try to repeal abortion rights, put prayer and the Ten Commandments in public schools, fight gay rights and gay marriage, and otherwise legislate their dogma.

The United States consistently sides with the Vatican and theocratic Islamist governments in debates at the United Nations. Congress has refused to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination, adopted 24 years ago by the UN General Assembly. That is a scandal.

But current American policy also impacts on women far from its shores. The women of Iraq, who enjoyed freedoms akin to those of Western women, have all but disappeared from public life since the US launched its war. The Global Gag rule first imposed by President Ronald Reagan, repealed by President Clinton and re-imposed by George Bush, has devastated health care and reproductive choices for millions of women worldwide (see *IHN*, November 2003).

Religion Retards Women's Empowerment

There is more, though, to women's liberation and Humanism than 'issues'. There are intangible kinds of rights. Elizabeth Cady Stanton's favorite homily was: "I believe in a definite purpose for girls. The thing which most retards, and militates against woman's self-development, is self-sacrifice. Put it down in capital letters, that self-development is a higher duty than self-sacrifice."

While I think many girls today are growing up with a 'definite sense of purpose', the human race clearly has a long way to go in embracing Stanton's 'duty of female self-development'. Scan the globe. We find that dress reform, equal rights, access to education and the means to control their own bodies remain unrealized dreams for all too many women. Why is this?

Elizabeth Cady Stanton answered this question herself, in a very powerful address to the Women's Suffrage Association in 1885:

You may go the world over and you will find that every form of religion which has breathed upon this earth has degraded woman. There is not one which has not made her subject to man. Men may rejoice in them because they



make man the head of the woman. I have been traveling this old world during the last few years and have found new food for thought. What power is it that makes the Hindoo woman burn herself on the funeral pyre of her husband? Her religion. What holds the Turkish woman in the harem? Her religion. By what power to the Mormons perpetuate their system of polygamy? By their religion.

Man, of himself, could not do this; but when he declares, 'Thus saith the Lord,' of course he can do it. So long as ministers stand up and tell us that as Christ is the head of the church, so is man the head of the woman, how are we to break the chains that have held women down through the ages? You Christian women can look at the Hindoo, the Turkish, the Mormon women, and wonder how they can be held in such bondage. Observe today the work women are doing for the churches. *The church rests on the shoulders of women...*

Now I ask you if our religion teaches the dignity of women? It teaches us that abominable idea of the sixth century – Augustine's idea – that motherhood is a curse; that woman is the author of sin, and is most corrupt... We want to help roll off from the soul of woman the terrible superstitions that have so long repressed and crushed her.

Former Catholic theologian Mary Daly put it more succinctly: 'As long as god is male, male is god.'

I researched Stanton and other women sceptics when I compiled an anthology of English-speaking women freethinkers, *Women Without Superstition: No Gods – No Masters*, published in 1997. The subtitle, 'No Gods – No Masters' was Margaret Sanger's credo, appearing on the masthead of her journal, *Woman Rebel*. It has its roots in the anarchist movement, but she made the motto plural. In a nutshell it rejects the master/slave hierarchy of male power over women and supernatural power over all humanity.

It has taken centuries of struggle for women to achieve what gains we have made. In the United States, every freedom won by women for women, small or large, from women not wearing bonnets in church, to being permitted to attend universities and enter professions, to vote, and to be the guardians of their own children, has been won against opposition from the churches.

The first to speak out for women's rights have been the secularists, freethinkers and unorthodox who were not intimidated by the power of religion. In Britain, freethinking Deist Mary Wollstonecraft wrote the first significant call for woman's rights, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in 1792. "[Women's] first duty is to themselves as rational creatures," she wrote. "A human being cannot be termed rational or virtuous who obeys any authority but that of reason."

Freethinking women filled the ranks of abolition and suffrage movements. They were and are the catalysts of all aspects of women's empowerment, calling for marriage and divorce rights, birth control, abortion, and the right of women to be free, to own themselves. Because organized religion has been the principal enemy of women's rights, women have played a special role in supporting secularism.

Concentrating on This World

In researching women's freethought writings I discovered a recurring Humanist theme sounded by these women: the importance of this world, of improving

life on Earth, rather than worrying about some unknown realm whose existence is unprovable. The Scottish reformer Frances Wright (1795–1852), the first to speak in public before a mixed ('promiscuous') assembly of men and women in the United States (1828), and to call for women's equality, expressed it thus:

We are on the earth, and they tell us of heaven; we are human beings, and they tell us of angels and devils; we are matter, and they tell us of spirit; we have 5 senses whereby to admit truths, and a reasoning faculty by which to build our belief upon them, and they tell us of dreams dreamed thousands of years ago, which all our experience flatly contradicts.

The American suffragist and writer Helen H. Gardener (1853–1925) wrote poignantly in 1885 words that are as timely as ever today:

I do not know of any divine commands. I do know of most important human ones. I do not know the needs of a god or of another world. . . . I do know that women make shirts for seventy cents a dozen in this one. I do know that the needs of humanity and this world are infinite, unending, constant, and immediate. They will take all our time, our strength, our love, and our thoughts; and our work here will be only then begun.

In my own words, I protest the fact that beliefs inconsistent with the known laws of science and reason have been used to hold women in subjection, to deny women rights, to punish, to diminish, even to terrorize. The union of such beliefs with the power of government is woman's greatest threat. Secularism is woman's best friend. Matilda Joslyn Gage, an American feminist from the 19th century, wrote:

The world has seemingly awaited the advent of heroic souls who once again should dare all things for the truth. The woman who possesses love for her sex, for the world, for truth, justice and right, will not hesitate to place herself upon record as opposed to falsehood, no matter under what guise of age or holiness it appears.

February 12: Celebrate Darwin Day!

All over the world, more and more Humanist and Rationalist groups as well as scientific institutions are putting on events to celebrate Darwin Day on 12 February, Darwin's birthday. This celebration of science and humanity, in honour of the scientist who perhaps more than any other has altered our understanding of the world and of ourselves, whose powerful explanation of the evolution of species made creator deities redundant, is of special significance to all of us. The idea of Darwin Day as a secular celebration has been promoted by the Darwin Day Program, a non-profit organization dedicated to educational and social outreach activities aimed at widening understanding of topics related to evolution, and countering the impact of misinformation.

More information about the Darwin Day Program, and a listing of events across the world, can be found at <http://darwinday.org>. Groups planning talks and exhibitions should contact the Program to register their event. Let's all help to put this secular celebration on everyone's calendar!

'There is grandeur in this view of life...from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.' Charles Darwin (1859)

How Humanism Can Help Bring Peace Between Arabs and Jews

By David Ibry

The present conflict between Arabs and Jews in the Middle East is probably one of the most serious and dangerous problems in the world today.

The Jews in Israel, as well as outside Israel, are a people identified by the Jewish religion, just as the Palestinian Arabs are identified primarily by the Muslim religion. The Jews dispersed in the world about 2,000 years ago. Somewhat similarly, in the past few decades, Arabs from Algeria, Morocco, and other countries have dispersed in France and other European countries.

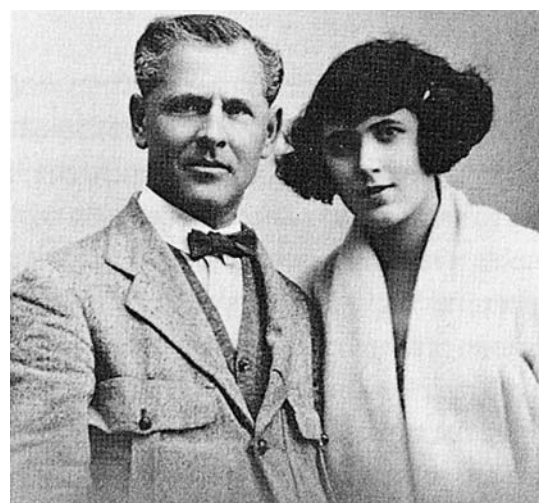
It is not widely known that Zionism began as a non-religious movement which also aimed at giving to the Jewish people a national identity connected to their ancestral homeland and entirely separate from the Jewish religion, just like the national identity of the English, or French, or Germans, which is separate from their religion. Religious Jews were against Zionism, but later jumped on to the bandwagon and, to a large extent, were able to hijack it.

Religions – all religions – constitute a major obstacle to peaceful coexistence between Arabs and Jews. Whereas all human ideas are fallible and open to compromise and the correction of possible mistakes, religion offers instead beliefs held with absolute certainty of their truth, because their messages are regarded as revelations from a source that must be infallible. I believe that Humanism could help Jews and Arabs to distinguish their identity from their religion, and thus help them to achieve a peaceful coexistence.

In 1913 and 1914, the Zionist leadership discussed how to prevent Arab hostility against Jewish immigration and the establishment of the state of Israel, and decided to undertake public relations exercises, contacting influential Arabs and explaining to them that Zionists had no intention of expelling them from the new state.



Khalil As-Sakakini and family in 1914.



Benjamin Ibry with his wife in 1923.

My father, Benjamin Ibry, born Benjamin Berstein in Russia, was a secular non-religious Zionist pioneer who followed the Zionist Congresses and was a lifelong friend of Hahad Ha'am (A. Ginzberg), widely regarded as the theoretical leader of secular Zionism. In 1914, my father had conversations about Zionism with a well-known Arab writer and educator, Khalil As-Sakakini. When Khalil As-Sakakini subsequently reported these conversations in his published diary, they were quoted by Arab politicians and scholars and acquired considerable historical relevance.

After 90 years, those conversations are still relevant, not so much for their content as for their spirit, representing as it does a genuine effort to reach an acceptable way for Arabs and Jews to live peacefully with one another.

From a Humanist point of view, the present, dangerously confrontational situation could be helped by following the lead offered by my father and Khalil As-Sakakini. Direct face-to-face discussions between Arabs and Jews should take place in front of the cameras so that they are open, and can be followed by as many as possible. It would of course be essential that non-religious points of view were presented effectively in any such debate. Such exposure to non-religious Humanist views may develop in some viewers new thought processes challenging the religious certainties with which they have been brainwashed since childhood. This would be an essential first step towards realizing that their religiously polarized views of the national conflict between Arabs and Jews are mistaken, and may lead them towards finding new ways to solve that conflict.

I believe that when sufficient numbers of Arabs and Jews start doubting their respective religious certainties, coexistence between the two nations will become easier to achieve.

David Ibry (email: exodtohumanism@btinternet.com) is the author of Exodus to Humanism: Jewish Identity Without Religion (Prometheus, 1999). The conversations between Benjamin Ibry and Khalil As-Sakakini formed the subject of extensive research by the scholar Gideon Shilo. His analysis was published in the December 1990 issue of Cathedra, the leading Israeli historical journal.

Canada: A Dangerous Trend

A few years ago, the Canadian province of Ontario introduced the Ontario Arbitration Act for civil matters in order to relieve pressure from its heavily backlogged courts. Under the Act, both parties to a dispute must agree to arbitration and, if mutually acceptable, people can use a religious framework.

Jewish religious courts known as “Beit Din”, and “Sentencing Circles” for aboriginal peoples were established under the Act. So when the Islamic Institute for Civil Justice suggested having arbitration tribunals based on Sharia law, they were not breaking new ground. However, other religious or cultural arbitration tribunals will depend on moral guidance to reach a fair and reasonable compromise. With Sharia tribunals, there will be no compromises. Instead, Islamic scholars will make a decision based entirely on the Sharia law which might not be in the best interest of the parties involved. If the Islamic Institute’s proposal is implemented, there will be tremendous pressure for Muslims, especially Muslim women, to agree to arbitration under Sharia law. Given the bias of Sharia law towards men, Muslim women will be at a disadvantage. This will lead to a de facto system of parallel laws for one group of citizens.

According to the Institute, Islamic arbitrators will be able to settle matters on contracts, divorce and inheritance. It is worth noting that Sharia law puts women at a serious disadvantage in the latter two categories. Although the Institute insists that child custody cases will be out of its jurisdiction and decisions will be made by the Canadian courts in the best interest of the child, there is concern that Muslim women will be pressured into following the Sharia law on custody issues as well.

The Islamic Institute for Civil Justice was established in October and its mandate is to explore ways to implement Sharia law via arbitration tribunals. The current council has 50 members which includes 10 women. The Institute plans to establish arbitration tribunals across the country. The 600,000 Muslims now in Canada will then have the legal option to settle civil arbitration cases under Sharia law rather than Canadian law. The question arises as to whether members of the Muslim community will feel free to reject Sharia arbitration tribunals and its decisions.

The Ontario Arbitration Act stipulates that all parties involved accept the decision reached. The courts will not approve a decision if one party doesn’t agree. Once a ruling has been accepted by the courts, it is binding and there is no appeal. Thus, if the Sharia law is implemented, decisions made by Islamic tribunal and accepted by the courts will be enforced. This will lead to the disturbing situation of the Canadian courts and police acting as administrators of Sharia law.

The courts will not uphold agreements if they violate Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms. No one in Canada expects to see the extreme sections of the Sharia law applied, such as stoning or the cutting off of hands for theft. But the acceptance of Sharia law, even in an attenuated form, in a democratic country such as Canada gives it credibility. With its decision to accept Sharia law in civil arbitration cases, Canada is helping legitimize the aim of fundamentalist Muslims to enforce their archaic, cruel, and discriminatory system of justice throughout the world.

Sheila Ayala, Humanist Association of Canada

Nepal: The Power of Superstition

The hold of superstition in Nepal was confirmed by a shocking incident in December. Two women, aged 60 and 70, were brutally stabbed to death by a man who accused them of practising witchcraft.

The two women, Ratna Maya Subedi and Goma Maya Sindal, lived in the Sarlahi district of eastern Nepal. According to the report of the Humanist Association of Nepal (HUMAN), the perpetrator, Dik Bahadur Bhujel, had been feeling unwell for several weeks. Following traditional practice, he had been ‘treated’ by a Tantric healer, the husband of Ratna Maya, who had told him that he was possessed by an evil spirit.

To drive out the spirit, Dik Bahadur Bhujel sought the help of two relatives who were shamans. During the rituals, which involved a goat, a cock, and a pair of pigeons, the shamans ‘discovered’ that the two women were evil witches.

Early on the morning of 24 December, 2003, Dik Bahadur’s health worsened and he began to shake. Shouting that the two ‘witches’ had cast spells on him, he demanded to see Ratna Maya. When she arrived, he attacked her. His family managed to overpower him and lock him in a room but he broke down the door and

killed Ratna Maya with a Khukuri, a traditional Nepalese weapon with an iron blade. He then headed for the house of the other ‘witch’, Goma Maya, and killed her too.

Dik Bahadur had been suffering from typhoid. Following pressure from HUMAN he has now been arrested and is awaiting trial.

Belief in witchcraft has been a social disease throughout the Hindu world since time immemorial. Irrational and inhuman superstitious practices deriving from Hinduism are deeply engrained in Nepalese society. Women have been accused of practising witchcraft, and humiliated and sometimes physically attacked. HUMAN is committed to raising public awareness about the issue and has launched a campaign against such barbaric, inhuman practices and the superstitions driving them. It has been involved in finding and highlighting crimes of this nature.

We appeal to Humanists worldwide to help support HUMAN’s activities against religious superstition and fundamentalism.

Ganga Prasad Subedi, Humanist Association of Nepal (HUMAN)

Water, Water Everywhere?

The year 2003 was the International Year of Fresh Water (www.wateryear2003.org). On October 16, the Dag Hammerschuld Auditorium was the setting for a briefing entitled 'Water of Life: Fresh Perspectives on the World's Water Crisis'. The hall was filled to overflowing. The briefing, and day-long programme, one of the most inspiring ever, came about because of the networking efforts of Martha Gallahue of the National Service Conference of the AEU with the UN Department of Social Affairs, the Values Caucus, and the Earth Values Caucus cooperating to bring an ethical perspective to this vital issue.

All of human life depends on fresh water. Only 2.5% of the world's water is fresh water, and three-quarters of that is frozen in ice caps. Currently 40% of the world's population is living in areas with moderate-to-high water stress, and water use is increasing faster than population growth. Unevenly distributed throughout the world, some countries have it in abundance, others are severely deprived.

With every flush of a toilet, we in the richer countries use up the same amount of water used by an average person in the developing world for every need in a day. Unsafe water and sanitation cause an estimated 80% of all disease in the developing world. Some 6,000 children die every day from diseases associated with unsafe water and poor sanitation hygiene. Girls are often not permitted to attend school because of the unsafe conditions caused by lack of proper latrines. Water used for irrigation can be unavailable because of cost, or is unfit for drinking. Women, the water carriers and primary users of water, bear the greatest burden of its misuse and scarcity. Clearly, increasing the supply of

water and maintaining its purity is a matter of life and death.

Only a few countries are wealthy enough to use desalination. Kuwait, Japan, and Italy, as well as the United States use some desalinated water. Saudi Arabia uses desalination to meet 70% of its drinking water needs. Desalination will become cheaper with increased demand and improved technology, but it will remain out of reach for poorer countries.

However the simpler technology of inexpensive ecological principles can provide answers. Dr John Todd, a professor at the University of Vermont, and founder of Water Stewards, Inc., is a water doctor who applies ecological principles to provide low cost and sustainable solutions. Fu Jong, a city in China with streets fouled by a sewage canal, has been transformed by a ribbon of plants which flourish on sewage, protecting the cleanliness of estuaries and bays. In water-starved Kenya, the construction of dirt pans to collect rain water has the extra benefit that the moist soil surrounding these mini-reservoirs produces fertile kitchen gardens. Similar projects are taking place in Nepal and India. With political will, South Africa has performed the remarkable feat of making fresh water available to half of its deprived population, an enormous improvement in seven short years.

Whatever the method, in projects involving cooperation between government and private industry, government must ensure that the benefits are fairly distributed. Solutions do exist. An ethical perspective joined with technical ingenuity and political will can do what needs to be done.

Sylvain and Phyllis Ehrenfeld

The Ageing World

We are living in the midst of an unprecedented transition, sometimes called the agequake. By 2050 the number of older persons in the world will exceed the number of young for the first time in history. As the 21st century began, the world's population included approximately 600 million older people, triple the number recorded 50 years earlier. By mid-century, there will be some 2 billion elderly – once again a tripling of the age group in a span of 50 years.

Will societies have the resources to pay for the increased needs of older people, particularly when the number of working young is diminishing? In the developed countries, national wealth has increased along with the increase in ageing. The underdeveloped countries will reach their agequake before their wealth increases.

Over the years the UN has recognized this trend and has explored the many issues it raises. Every October the UN celebrates the Day of Older Persons. Two major world conferences on ageing have been held, one in 1982, and one more recently in 2002. The 1982 conference mostly concerned the richer countries where the ageing had begun. There the issues were discussed in terms of caring for the welfare of older persons. At

the 2002 conference the emphasis was on mainstreaming older people, using their skills as a treasured resource. The approach was inter-generational, avoiding age stratification into youth groups and elder enclaves. By building bridges between generations, the model is a society for all ages.

The facts are simple. In most countries people are having fewer children, and people are living longer. However, because of the explosive birth rate of the past, some societies are going through a massive youth bulge, with more than half the population under 25 – in Saudi Arabia 62%, Yemen 68%, and Iran 60%. Many young people are becoming restless without productive work. They present a major and growing political problem.

At the annual celebration of the International Day of Older Persons the emphasis was on healthy active ageing, education for all ages, human rights and dignity. We have added years to our lives. What kind of life will we add to these years?

Sylvain and Phyllis Ehrenfeld are IHEU Representatives to the UN and the AEU's National Service Conference. These are adapted, edited versions of their full reports, available at www.iheu.org.

Conspiracy and Euthanasia

Dr Michael Irwin, President of the World Federation of Right to Die Societies and Chairman of the British Voluntary Euthanasia Society, was arrested at his home in England and taken to the Isle of Man for questioning following the death in late October of Patrick Kneen, 74, after a long battle against prostate cancer (see box). The case has raised several disturbing issues.

When Dr Irwin visited him in Douglas earlier in October, Mr Kneen was already too ill for Dr Irwin to help him end his life, a fact apparently recognized by the police. Nevertheless, they are considering whether to charge Dr Irwin with conspiring to assist a suicide. Under the UK's draconian and wide-ranging conspiracy law no crime need have been committed; it is only necessary for two or more people to have discussed the possibility of committing a crime – in this case for Dr Irwin and Mrs Kneen to have discussed the possibility of Dr Irwin assisting Mr Kneen to end his life – for Dr Irwin to be faced with up to 14 years in jail.

Following his arrest Dr Irwin stepped down as Chairman of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society, whose board offered him less than their full support. In articles in the national newspapers, Deborah Annetts, the VES Chief Executive, is quoted as saying: "We are taking this news extremely seriously and have launched an internal investigation into the matter. The society's constitution states that we campaign within the law for greater patient choice at the end of life. Everyone who works for VES or acts on our behalf is made aware of their obligation to campaign within the law at all times." This stance is itself questioned by many members of the VES.

By contrast, the Executive Committee of the World Federation have offered Dr Irwin their support, urging him to stay on as president.

Dr Irwin has been a long-time campaigner for voluntary euthanasia and, in the past, has admitted to helping several of his terminally ill patients to die by offering fatal quantities of drugs to ease their suffering.

Obituary: Patrick Kneen

Patrick Kneen, who mounted a determined campaign for Doctor Assisted Dying to be legalized on the Isle of Man, died on Thursday, 23 October.

The 74-year-old Manxman had prostate cancer with secondaries and was told early in 2003 that he had, at most, a few years left to live. He immediately told friends in the Manx Humanist community that he would spend his last days campaigning for a Bill which would allow a dignified end for others like him, though he might not live long enough to benefit personally.

Mr Kneen launched his 'Manx For Death With Dignity' campaign (Manx 4DWD) with a letter to the local newspaper in Spring 2003, asking for a local politician to push for a Bill in Tynwald, the Manx parliament. Two politicians rose to the challenge and were granted leave to introduce a Bill, subject to a Tynwald committee being formed first to consider evidence and make a report to the House of Keys.

With assistance from a small, predominantly Secular Humanist, group of helpers the campaign gained local media coverage, a website (www.Manx4DWD.org.uk) and interest from the national press, regional BBC and independent radio and television.

The inevitable religious backlash soon began, with 'experts' arriving to panic the gullible, the elderly and the disabled with scare stories and Biblical 'proof'. But an online poll by the local newspaper showed that 80% approved a change in the law. Manx 4DWD distributed postcards to every Island household, asking people to send them to politicians to demand the change. Almost 4,500 of the population of 70,000 did so. And over 200 local submissions of evidence were sent to the Tynwald committee by the deadline of 30 September.

By this point Patrick Kneen was confined to his home, having lost his sight, but continued to listen and comment publicly right to the end. In less than a year Pat's campaign has transformed this Island so much, and Manx Humanism in particular. We'll miss Pat, but we will finish what he started.

*Stuart Hartill, Manx For Death With Dignity
Campaign Secretary and Member of Isle of Man Freethinkers*

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You may go the world over and you will find that every form of religion which has breathed upon this earth has degraded woman. There is not one which has not made her subject to man.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 1885