



# INTERNATIONAL HUMANIST NEWS

February 2003  
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## IHEU and African Humanism

# INTERNATIONAL HUMANIST NEWS



**February 2003**

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**Cover: IHEU President Levi Fragell with Leo Igwe, Principal of Mayflower Senior School and other members of the school staff.**

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

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## From the Executive Director

The New Year has begun at a hectic pace for IHEU. By the time this issue of *IHN* reaches you, IHEU President Levi Fragell will have returned from Pakistan having met with Dr Shaikh's lawyers, human rights activists and contacts in diplomatic circles. We continue our efforts to take the Dr. Shaikh campaign forward – Dr. Shaikh himself wrote to me recently sending his best wishes and thanks to IHEU and to all those who are campaigning for his freedom.

An IHEU delegation consisting of Levi Fragell and IHEU Vice Presidents Roy Brown and Sonja Eggerickx will travel to India in January to participate in the 10th anniversary celebrations of IHEU Member Organization Viveka Vidyalayam (Humanist School), and in the inauguration of a Radical Humanist Centre – more of that in the next issue.

IHEU First Vice President Robbi Robson was in Belgium recently along with Rob Buitenweg from The Netherlands and Roar Johnsen from Norway to discuss with leaders of the European Humanist Federation ways and means of strengthening Humanism in Europe. Within a span of 30 days I was pleased to represent IHEU on CNN and on the BBC World Service, taking part in 30-minute-long discussion programmes. In December IHEU re-launched the IHEU-HIVOS Humanist Networking and Development Programme, under which IHEU will disburse nearly US\$60,000 of assistance annually to Humanist projects in the Third World (p.21). And this month IHEU launched its World Humanist Youth Database on its website at [www.iheyo.org](http://www.iheyo.org) (p.18).

More than ever before, IHEU is reaching out to Humanists around the globe, and making an all out effort to support the growth of Humanism in the world. It is important for IHEU to set the lead and take the initiative in a world that needs a Humanist vision. So how can we achieve more for Humanism? What can you do to help us achieve more? Do bring your thoughts to the International Symposium and IHEU General Assembly in May in Washington DC.

*Babu Gogineni*

## INVITATION FOR ARTICLES

- *IHN* welcomes original, previously unpublished non-academic contributions on subjects of interest to the world-wide community of Humanists. Articles should be around 1200 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 the *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 as e-mail text, but not as attachments, because of virus complications. Photographs and illustrations are welcome.
- Contributors should include a complete address as well as a phone 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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## News

# IHEU Adopts 5-year Plan and Launches President's Club

London, 1 January, 2003

In a move aimed at greatly enhancing our ability to respond to the increasing challenges faced by International Humanism, IHEU today announced a new fundraising drive and launched a President's Club for major donors.

At the annual strategy meeting held last October at the Chateau de Bédier in France, the IHEU Executive Committee reviewed the tasks facing the organization over the coming years and agreed and adopted a new five-year Strategic Plan. Key to the success of this plan will be our ability substantially to increase our level of activity on a number of fronts: supporting member organizations in their

campaigns for secular government and the separation of religion and state, campaigning worldwide for women's rights and on behalf of victims of oppression, improving our level of representation within major international organizations such as the UN, and providing financial support for Humanist projects and groups in poorer countries.

IHEU headquarters currently operates with a tiny budget and only one full-time employee, ably assisted by an intern and a handful of volunteers. But cash resources for printing, publishing, and project support have until now been severely constrained. The fundraising drive will target both individual supporters and groups able to commit to a

minimum of \$500. Donors will be able to specify their preferences for where and how their donations will be used, and as well as knowing that their money will be put to the best possible use, will receive a number of other benefits, culminating in membership of the President's Club for major donors. Members of the President's Club will have the opportunity of meeting annually with the President and other Members of the Executive Committee to contribute to the discussion of major issues for International Humanism.

For more information or to request a donor pack, please call Executive Director Babu Gogineni on +44 20 7831 4817, or IHEU Vice-President, Larry Jones on +1 518 432 7820

## Humanist Shahriar Kabir Arrested Again



Well known Bangladeshi journalist and human rights activist Shahriar Kabir has once again been arrested by the Government of

Bangladesh headed by Begum Khaleda Zia of the Bangladesh National Party in December 2002. Shahriyar Kabir heads the Nirmul Committee which demands the trial and punishment of those accused of genocide during the Bangladesh War of Independence in 1971, likely to implicate many partners of the present government.

Shahriyar Kabir was first arrested in November 2001 when the Government charged him with sedition and accused him of tarnishing the image of the government because he was investigating murderous attacks on the Hindu minority and was recording evidence given by survivors. He was later released on bail. His second arrest along with teacher-activist Professor Muntassir Mamoons was declared illegal by a Division Bench of the Bangladesh High Court on 4 January 2003.

Defying the High Court judgment that Shahriyar Kabir's arrest was illegal under Section 54 of the Code

of Criminal Procedure which allows the police to detain people without an arrest warrant, the government has extended his detention by 90 days using the much misused, draconian Special Powers Act. As we go to press, the pressure on the Bangladesh Government to release the two human rights activists is mounting.

Shahriyar Kabir visited IHEU Headquarters in 2002 when he travelled to Europe to research at the International Institute for Social History. When Babu Gogineni asked if he felt safe going back to Bangladesh, he responded: "Yes, it has been suggested I should not return to Bangladesh and that I should bring my immediate family out of the country. But what about my family of millions of Bangladeshis who are in the country and suffering?"

IHEU has issued a widely circulated statement, and will take up the matter at the international institutions through its representatives.

**Please send letters of protest (with a copy to IHEU at [campaign@iheu.org](mailto:campaign@iheu.org)) to: Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, Gona Bhaban, Sher-e Bangla Nagar, Dhaka, Bangladesh  
Fax: + 880 2 811 3243**

## IHEU Welcomes New Associate Member

IHEU is pleased to welcome as an Associate Member organization The International School of Humanitarian Thought and Practice. The International School was represented at IHEU Congresses in Mexico, Mumbai and Amsterdam and their application was endorsed by B. Premanand of Indian CSICOP, Prof. Jayanti Patel of the Indian Radical Humanist Association, leaders of Kerala Yukthi Vadi Sangom, Bihar Buddhivadi Sangom and Prof. Babu Desai of Satya Shodhak Sabha, Gujarat, all Member organizations of IHEU.

Despite some raised eyebrows at the saffron robes worn by the president of this organization, and at his assumed title, "Swami" Manavatavadi (Manavatavadi meaning Humanist), his secular credentials are well known and accepted by many Canadian and American as well as Indian Humanists. As Manavatavadi explains, "I was given the saffron robes as a child and have always worn them. I see them as a useful sign that outward appearances can be misleading, we must be judged rather by thought and deed. I and my organization accept the IHEU Minimum Statement".

# IHEU – The Challenges

By Roy Brown, IHEU Vice-President

IHEU is a democratic international organization representing over 90 Humanist organizations in 35 countries. Ours is a quiet voice of reason confronting the tyrannies of the modern world: political, economic, cultural and religious. We need to speak louder.

Our task is huge. We support many of our member organizations in their struggles against inequality and oppression. In Africa we support secularism against the increasing demands of political Islam and the encroachment of Sharia law. We add our international voices to those in Nigeria calling for the release of young women condemned to death for immorality. We continue to campaign for the release of a colleague and others condemned to death for blasphemy in Pakistan. In India we support the secular constitution and the rights of minorities against the forces of Hindu nationalism, and we work with local NGOs to provide basic health care and education for women and girls. In Europe we are working for equal rights for the non-religious in the face of massive lobbying by the Catholic Church and its allies for special privileges.

At the UN in New York, where IHEU has specialist NGO status, we work with national delegations on the detailed content of international agreements affecting the lives of millions: on the rights of women, children and minorities, on the relief of suffering, the elimination of poverty and towards a sustainable future for the planet.

In many countries, including many in the West, democracy is under attack from those who seek to politicize religion. We campaign worldwide for the separation of religion and state.

The rise of fundamentalism – Christian, Islamic and Hindu – poses a major challenge to Humanism. We campaign with member organizations in many countries for the repeal of tyrannical blasphemy laws. When faced with extremes of injustice, with cases of individuals condemned to death or imprisonment without just cause, IHEU works to mobilize the press and public opinion and to bring diplomatic pressure to bear on the governments concerned.

Economic tyranny is perhaps the most widespread, powerful and difficult obstacle to the realization of human happiness and dignity. The answer surely lies in providing the poorest and most neglected in society with the means to help themselves. IHEU works to support grassroots organizations in the poorest countries by providing information on their needs, and by seeking funding for their support, from potential donors in the West.

At the Strategic Planning Meeting held in France in October 2002, the Executive Committee of IHEU identified five priorities for the years ahead:

First, we want to strengthen our representation within international organizations such as the United Nations, UNESCO and the Council of Europe. We shall seek to network with other NGOs and groups with whom IHEU can cooperate. The long-term objectives of our representational programme are:

- To support the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- To develop an international policy agenda based on Humanist values and ethics and the policy positions agreed by the IHEU General Assembly.
- To increase the visibility of IHEU's representative activities within both the international and Humanist communities.

Secondly, we aim to do more to bring our worldwide membership closer together through conferences, meetings and the exchange of information and ideas. A major focus will be the International Humanist and Ethical Youth Organization, re-launched in 2002. We see a clear need to improve and update our communications. We plan to provide promotional material publicizing the work of IHEU in English, French, Spanish, German, Hindi and Telugu. And we plan to develop and publish Humanist position papers on topics of particular concern to the international Humanist community, such as the rights of women, Sharia law, and separation of religion and state. The IHEU website will become our primary source of information for member organizations and supporters, with links to the sites of all member groups. Also on the Internet we plan to create a Humanist News Portal, to publish a regular electronic newsletter, and to establish a rapid-response network for breaking news.

One of the primary purposes of IHEU is to stimulate and support the growth of small existing Humanist organizations and to assist in the creation of new groups where none currently exist. This work is being undertaken by the Committee for Growth and Development. The long-term aim of the Committee and the development programme is to build a successful and sustainable Humanist organization effective in every country in the world. Regional coordinators have now been appointed for Europe, Russia and Central Asia, Latin America, the Islamic states, and sub-Saharan Africa. We plan to appoint further coordinators for India, China, North America, Australasia and South-East Asia within the coming year.

IHEU will continue to administer the HIVOS development grant and hopefully expand the IHEU International Development Fund. Most member organizations have a commitment to the development of global Humanism and many, we hope, will be willing and able to contribute resources to the development programme. In collaboration with the Institute for Humanist Studies, IHEU is establishing a clearing house for donors, grant requests, responses and grants. We also plan to organize leadership-training seminars and internships.

In March this year IHEU will be moving offices again as the lease on 47 Theobalds Road expires. At some point within the next 5 years we hope to be able to acquire, equip and occupy a permanent home and headquarters for the International Humanist Movement.

But none of these plans can be realized without adequate financial resources. Lack of funding is the greatest challenge we currently face. Significantly greater financial resources are needed if IHEU is to realize its ambitions for global Humanism. Member organizations and individuals need to give greater support to IHEU both financially and by lending their skills and efforts to our cause. In this issue of *International Humanist News* we launch a new appeal for funds and have announced the creation of the IHEU President's Club. During the coming year we plan to launch public appeals for specific single-issue campaigns: on women's rights, and in support of victims of oppression. Watch this space.

# IHEU President's Visit to Africa

By Leo Igwe

**From November 25 to December 9, 2002, the President of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, Mr. Levi Fragell, made a high-profile visit to the African continent. The trip, the first of its kind by an IHEU President, took him to Ghana, Nigeria and Uganda.**

## Ghana

On Monday, 25 November, Mr. Levi Fragell, President of IHEU, was received at Ghana's Katoka International Airport by myself, as the IHEU Growth and Development Representative in Sub-Saharan Africa, and two other young Ghanaian Humanists, George Arkoh and Addo Agyei. George and Addo head a youth Humanist group in Ghana.

In a talk delivered at the first port of call, the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, in Legon, Levi Fragell spoke on IHEU and the need for organized Humanism. IHEU, he said, is the umbrella group representing over 3 million non-religious humanists, atheists, agnostics and ethical culturalists around the world. He stressed the need for non-religious individuals in Ghana, and across Africa as a whole, to organize themselves and work together to promote Humanism and contribute to the growth and development of their society. Welcoming the IHEU President to the University, the Director of the Institute, Prof. Takyiwa Manuh, said the message of Humanism would be of immense benefit to Ghanaians, particularly in the battle against superstition and intolerance. She decried the state of education in Ghana, which she said was on the verge of losing its tradition of freethought, and expressed hope that Humanism could help restore this.

## Nigeria

The Nigerian leg of the tour began with a visit to the headquarters of the influential weekly magazine *TELL*, where Levi Fragell emphasized the role of the media as a potent tool for socio-political development. The IHEU President called on media outfits to rise to the challenge of defending human rights – particularly freedom of religion or belief, and freedom of expression – that were increasingly coming under threat due to religious fundamentalism. Fragell was in Nigeria four weeks after Muslims and Christians clashed in the city of Kaduna leaving over 250 people dead (see box). The IHEU President condemned the fatwa issued against *This Day* journalist Isioma Daniel, and the death sentence passed on Amina Lawal. He said the world Humanist body would campaign to support Daniel and Lawal as it has done in the case of Taslima Nasrin of Bangladesh.

In Ibadan, Levi Fragell visited the Educare Trust, a non-governmental organization dedicated to youth development, which campaigns against drug abuse and smoking, and promotes AIDS awareness. Fragell commended the management of the Educare Trust for its worthwhile programmes, particularly its anti-smoking campaign, which he said is much needed in Africa, and in other parts of the Third World today. Fragell also visited the African Heritage Research Library (AHRL), some 10 km outside Ibadan. The AHRL is the first rural-community-based African studies research library in Africa. Fragell was shown round the library by its Director and Founder, Dr. Bayo Adebawale, accompanied by the Chief Librarian, Mrs. Funua Olade, and other members of the library staff. Welcoming the



Levi Fragell with Leo Igwe (second from left, front row) and members of the Nigerian Humanist Movement.

## IHEU President Holds Up the Candle of Freedom in Nigeria

### Sharia and Nigeria

Nigeria is Africa's most populous nation, with 120 million citizens, 250 languages and Islam in the north and Christianity in the south as the major religions. The country's slow recovery on the path of freedom and democracy after several years of debilitating military despotism has been severely hampered by the introduction of barbaric Sharia law and the enmity between religious communities that this has engendered: sectarian riots have resulted in the deaths of over 3000 people in the last two years.

The country's federal constitution is secular, but in the northern Nigerian states, Islamic punishments exist: flogging for consuming alcohol, amputation of limbs for theft and stoning to death for adultery.

### Amina Lawal, Miss World and *This Day*

It is such legislation in the state of Katsina that led to 30-year-old Amina Lawal's death sentence, after being tried for adultery and for bearing a child outside wedlock. The judge presiding in the Upper Sharia Court, Ahaji Aliyu Abdullahi Katsina, ruled that Amina be publicly executed for adultery. Punishment will be implemented after her seven-month-old baby is weaned. If the federal government does not intervene, Amina will now be buried up to her shoulders and stoned to death. However, the father of the "illegitimate" child has been discharged, for he swore by the Koran that he was not the father of the child and Sharia law does not recognize scientific paternity tests... A worldwide campaign to save Amina's life and to oppose the brutality of this law is under way.

Amina's case formed the backdrop to the widespread boycott of the Miss World contest in Nigeria's capital city, Lagos. Many foreign contestants refused to participate in an event held in a country with such barbaric punishments. Domestically, Islamic fundamentalists opposed the holding of such an event – described as degrading and insulting to women and to their religion – during their holy month of Ramadan.

In developments that astonished the civilized world, an allegedly blasphemous statement referring to the Prophet Mohammad in a piece on the protests in the fashion page of the national newspaper *This Day* sparked off uncontrolled rioting by angry Islamist thugs, resulting in conflict between Christian and Muslim communities in the city of Kaduna. Over 200 people died, and 30,000 people lost their homes.

### The Fatwa and IHEU's Stance

In the immediate aftermath of riots in a community, it is important to restore calm by reconciling the warring sections of society. However, taking advantage of the relative inaction by the federal government headed by the Christian President Obasanjo, Mahamoud Shinkafi, the Deputy Governor of Zamfara State, another northern Nigerian state, issued a fatwa and called on Muslims to kill Isioma Daniel, the London-trained journalist who wrote the newspaper article. Isioma Daniel fled the country to save her own life.

This tense and explosive situation was the immediate context of Levi Fragell's visit to Nigeria. Addressing a press conference at the Lagos headquarters of the influential weekly magazine *Tell*, and recalling the salutary role of the press during the period of military dictatorship, Levi Fragell emphasized that the "fatwa issued against journalist Isioma Daniel is *malafide*, and an assault on human rights and fundamental freedoms, particularly the freedom of the press and freedom of expression. To condemn to death any person for the mere utterance or writing of words, however reckless they may be, is unthinkable in today's world. No religion should enjoy the privilege of special protection or immunity from comment or criticism." Terming it "another sad indicator of Nigeria's regress into an Islamic dark age", Levi Fragell demanded that the federal government intervene to save Nigeria from being irretrievably thrown into the savagery of religious intolerance.

### Human Rights not Holy Books

Recalling a 2000 judgment by the Bangladesh Supreme Court which banned all fatwas (Bangladesh is an Islamic country), Levi Fragell said that fatwas have no legitimacy in a modern world, and those seeking to deal rough 'justice' in this manner in defiance of civilized law must be punished for incitement to murder. He further called for legislation that draws inspiration from the values of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights rather than outdated books claiming to have divine provenance, be they the Koran, the Bible or the Vedas. Referring to Amina Lawal's case, Levi Fragell extended IHEU's solidarity with her plight and made it clear that the choice of a life partner, or the decision to have a child is a fundamental human right and an intensely personal one, which cannot be abrogated by any religious or political dictat.

IHEU and its member organizations will step forward to help Amina and Isioma, in the same way as they came to the defence of the rights of Salman Rushdie and Taslima Nasrin. The worldwide Humanist community will continue to fight for the strictest separation of religion and state, which is the only way to guarantee freedom of conscience and of expression for all people, irrespective of their creed.

Please send your letters of support to [campaign@iheu.org](mailto:campaign@iheu.org) Please post this on your websites or circulate it or create a weblink to IHEU's website at [www.iheu.org](http://www.iheu.org) so that the voice of freedom is better heard.

*Babu Gogineni*

IHEU President, Dr. Adebowale said he was delighted to have a Humanist leader of Levi Fragell's stature visit the library. He pointed out that the library and the Humanist Movement have something in common – the belief in human potential. He expressed the hope that both institutions would work together to promote this objective. Speaking at the library, the IHEU President praised Dr. Adebowale for his courage, thoughtfulness and foresight in founding a library in a typical rural community without electricity or good roads. The library, he said, epitomizes a key Humanist value – that of enlightenment.

Education continued as the theme with a visit to the unique secular Mayflower School at Ikenne in Ogun State, where Fragell addressed a gathering of 3000 students (see box). He urged the students to embrace the Humanist values of peace, tolerance and compassion, as opposed to the fundamentalist gospel of hatred, intolerance and violence. The following day, Fragell spoke to university lecturers, students and fellow Humanists at a meeting of the Nigerian Humanist Movement at the nation's premier university, the University of Ibadan. In my welcoming address as Executive Secretary of the Nigerian Humanist Movement, I thanked the IHEU President for creating

time to visit and meet with African Humanists. African Humanist individuals and groups are looking forward to an effective working relationship with the world Humanist body. The IHEU President was asked to convey to the Executive Committee the desire of African Humanists that the IHEU sponsor a regional congress in Africa in 2004, and a world congress in 2008. In his remarks, Fragell said he was delighted to be in Nigeria, and to meet with Nigerian Humanists. He reiterated the readiness of the world Humanist body to work and contribute to the growth and development of Humanism in Nigeria and in Africa as a whole.

The IHEU President's final visit in Nigeria was to the headquarters of the Association for Reproductive and Family Health (ARFH) in Ibadan. The ARFH works to initiate, promote and implement community-based sexual and reproductive health and family planning programmes through training, technical assistance, programme development, evaluation and operational research. The President of the ARFH, Prof. Ladipo, described the organization's reproductive health programmes and services in schools and market places across the country. But he pointed out that in order to receive grants from the United States Government the organization had been obliged to sign an undertaking

## A Humanist Project for Africa

**Despite their conspicuous lack of presence in the African media, many people in Africa are indeed oriented towards achieving a positive change in the individual and in society. Today we are witnessing profound changes in the minds of Africans. Despite the disconcerting tragedy of African life, over the past several decades there has emerged a growing number of people culturally attached to Africa's diverse riches and diverse values. In an Africa which is still looking for itself, asphyxiated by indebtedness to international financial institutions, marked by one of the fastest growing poverties on the planet; in an Africa ravaged by wars, affected seriously by the pandemic of AIDS and faced with rapidly changing technology and the third millennium; in an Africa where hope and despair alternate, Humanism can represent a coherent alternative to the situation as it acts with and works for the human.**

**Africa has no time to wait for a change of heart among its rulers. It is for each African to take charge of the situation and to give society an authentic human direction. It is an immense challenge. Despite this, we are happily seeing Africa organize itself, emerging from its distant image and democratizing itself slowly. And should we not recognize this and give Africa its due? It is Africa which made one of the most dramatic human gestures during the transfer of power in South Africa and its national reconciliation, after painful years of crime and violation of human rights.**

**It is in this Africa of hope that thousands of women and men are today the architects of an unprecedented historic change, where the African people are implementing the practical realization of a humanized Earth. They are directing themselves forward on the strength of their Humanist ideals, moving towards the consolidation of a universal human nation. To achieve this fully, Africa must, as was done at IHEU's 14th World Congress in Mumbai, India, develop and affirm 'Humanism for Human Development and Happiness'.**

**For the majority of Africans, happiness is closely linked to improvement in the quality of life. We must uphold and promote Humanist ideas in a big way, through projects that will respond to the needs and expectations of Africans: education, the raising of consciousness of the masses, family planning, promotion of democracy, the fight against poverty and AIDS. These projects must necessarily integrate teaching of Humanist ideas, respecting the cultural identity of Africans and taking into account their social and economic situation.**

**Our challenge remains more than ever the bringing together of people of all cultures, origins, backgrounds, contexts and beliefs who will then act voluntarily and organize their activity within a human framework. To take this task to its logical conclusion, thousands of us are needed.**

*Nestor Ambrose Diatta, Espérance Laique, Senegal*



**The IHEU President receives a video of his visit to the African Heritage Research Library from its Director, Dr Bayo Adebowale, at a reception organized by the Nigerian Humanist Movement at the University of Ibadan.**

that it would not support or carry out abortions. In his remarks, the IHEU President said that the world Humanist body supports family planning and other reproductive health programmes in Asia. He said it was shocking that the Bush administration had adopted the misguided agenda of the Christian Right to block not only abortion but other reproductive health programmes in the Third World, where such services are so badly needed.

### Uganda

In Uganda, several Humanists from the Ugandan Humanist Association (UHASSO) were on hand to receive the IHEU President, including Mr Mwasokwa from Tanzania, who is working on forming a Humanist association for that country. It is hoped that, in the future, the Humanist associations of Uganda and Tanzania can form part of an East African Regional Humanist Network. In a meeting with UHASSO's Executive Committee, Mr. Paul Wanume, the Projects Coordinator, described the efforts of UHASSO to develop Humanist projects under severe financial constraints. A particular need was for education projects in teacher training colleges, which would sensitize the next generation of teachers to the dangers of corporal punishment and help them recognize the need for and value of secular education. Mr Deo Sekitoleko, the founding chairperson of UHASSO, spoke of the valued support from the Council of Secular Humanism, and from Mr. Norm Allen of the African Americans for Humanism, and requested that IHEU consider organizing an international conference in Uganda in the next couple of years.

There were two special events. The first was a visit to the Bushenyi Humanist Association, 300 km from Kampala, where a new office was opened and a public meeting arranged for local people, resulting in a very lively discussion. Fragell met three young survivors of the horrific mass suicide that had occurred in a cult church nearby, in which more than 500 burnt themselves to death – a grim reminder of the importance of Humanism. The other special event was the launch of the Freethought Association of Bukalasa Agricultural

College; a significant percentage of the students had joined and took part in the function. Fragell gave a talk focusing on the irrationality and dangers of practices such as “speaking in tongues” and faith healing. Among other speakers, Mr. Moses Kulazikulabe spoke of the role that the Dutch Reformed Church had taken in justifying apartheid in South Africa, and Mr. Sekitoleko encouraged students to adopt the lively culture of thought and debate that had characterized the 1950s and 1960s, during Africa's struggle for independence: too many students now spent time in prayer meetings rather than intellectual discussion. Ugandan Humanists are building a network of groups at schools and colleges and have been able to establish themselves as a real alternative for young people sceptical of religious feuds and superstitions.

At a special luncheon, Levi Fragell met with the Norwegian Ambassador to Uganda, the last event of what had been a busy, valuable and inspiring African tour.

### Why IHEU Interest in Africa is Important

IHEU has as part of its mission the encouragement of growth and development of Humanism around the globe. It is therefore imperative that IHEU takes a serious interest in the establishment of Humanism in the African continent. Africa, unlike other continents, does not have a tradition of organized Humanism. Humanism has so far been a private life stance. It is only in the closing decades of the 20th century that Humanist groups started emerging in the continent. There are now Humanist societies in a number of African countries, including Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, Tanzania, South Africa and Uganda. But Africa is a deeply religious society, and these Humanist groups operate in a very hostile and antagonistic environment. African Humanists are frequently persecuted or socially ostracized for openly affirming their Humanist identity. Moreover, African Humanist groups generally face enormous organizational challenges. Many of them lack the resources to organize meetings, hold conferences and publish newsletters. IHEU can go a long way in strengthening organized Humanism in Africa by providing Humanist groups with moral, material, financial and logistical assistance. At the start of the 21st century, Africa is set to play a major role in the



**Levi with Leo Igwe, the Principal of Mayflower Senior School and other members of the school staff.**

International Humanist Movement. The world Humanist body must therefore make the development of Humanism in the continent a top priority.

There are a lot of benefits in this for Africa, for her peoples and for humanity at large. Strengthening organized Humanism in the continent will reinforce Humanist fellowship and solidarity among non-religious Africans, many of whom are suffocating in their closets. The liberating message of Humanism can help facilitate the emancipation of many Africans living under oppressive conditions. Humanist philosophy can serve as a powerful tool in combating the religious fundamentalism and ethnic bigotry that are threatening to tear many African countries apart. For instance, in my own country, Nigeria, Islamic fundamentalism is on the rise. Muslim fanatics have foisted Sharia law on 12 out of the 36 states in violation of the country's secular constitution and basic human rights. They are vigorously scheming and campaigning to Islamicize the country and establish a theocracy. Muslim fundamentalists have opposed, often violently, everything they believe to be anti-Islamic – the introduction of sex education, immunization of children, the campaign against female genital mutilation and the separation of religion and state. Recently, in the northern city of Kaduna, Islamic militants rioted and clashed with Christians over the Miss World Contest being held in the country, massacring hundreds of innocent civilians. Over 8000 Nigerians have lost their lives to religious conflicts since the nation's independence. For such a complex and diverse country with a volatile ethno-religious mix, Humanism is essential to save the nation from disintegration. Humanism can also serve as a rallying and reconciling force for the warring factions in Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda and Sudan.

As a philosophy of human rights, dignity and progress, the Humanist worldview will facilitate the restoration of the humanity, dignity and respectability of Africans, which have suffered much due to the vicissitudes of history – slavery, colonialism and racism – and of course Africans' own amnesia. As happened in Medieval Europe, the Humanist outlook can help nurture the Renaissance spirit and much needed intellectual awakening, secularization and enlightenment. The visit of the IHEU President to the African continent at this time has helped showcase the region's Humanist potential and has served as a reminder of promises that have until now been neglected or ignored. But while there is a lot of hope for African Humanism, many challenges remain and much work still needs to be done.

*Leo Igwe is IHEU Growth and Development Representative for Sub-Saharan Africa.*



## The Mayflower School

**Located in Ikenne, in southwestern Nigeria, the Mayflower School was founded by the late Nigerian educator and Humanist, Dr. Tai Solarin. Solarin, who died in 1994, was the first Nigerian openly to profess atheism and humanism in a country where almost everyone pretends to be very religious.**

**The school, named after the ship on which pilgrims sailed from England to the New World in 1620, was the first private secular school in Nigeria. In Nigeria, schools are controlled by religious organizations – mainly Christian and Islamic groups who use them as tools of evangelization and proselytization. But Solarin was a staunch advocate of secular education, and vehemently campaigned against the control and management of schools by religious bodies.**

**In its early days, the Mayflower Project faced stiff opposition, criticism and scepticism about its future and survival. The Ministry of Education believed that the school would die prematurely, while a Nigerian cleric predicted that the project would not last because it was not founded on belief in God! But Solarin, along with his wife Sheila, succeeded in proving the sceptics wrong. The Mayflower School has been a monumental success. The school started with 70 students in 1956, and in 1997 the number of students rose to 1800. Today, there are over 7500 students in the school's senior and junior sections combined.**

**All the students come from religious backgrounds. Sons and daughters of pastors, imams and priests throng the place. Unlike other schools in Nigeria, the curriculum of the Mayflower School is essentially secular. Humanist messages are posted on the school walls. One of them reads: "You can become what you choose to become". Emphasis is placed on science subjects. The teaching of religion is prohibited. Instead the students receive secular moral instruction.**

**The Mayflower School is reputed for both moral and academic excellence. The school has produced eminent scholars and distinguished scientists, doctors, engineers and lawyers. The first Nigerian woman engineer was a graduate of the school.**

**During his visit to Nigeria, Mr. Levi Fragell, President of IHEU, visited the school and spoke at the Students' Sunday morning gathering. Fragell urged the students to cultivate the habit of tolerance. According to Fragell, tolerance is critical to the growth and development of Nigeria. He told students not to engage in religious violence. He condemned the religious killings in Kaduna, and stressed the need for Nigerian Christians, Muslims, believers and non-believers alike to live together peacefully and harmoniously, enjoying students to take this message home to their families and friends.**

# Belgium's Legalization of Euthanasia

By Jacqueline Herremans

**In the first of two reports on legal developments involving Humanist issues in Belgium, Jacqueline Herremans describes the efforts leading to the decriminalization of euthanasia, and the nature and provisions of the new law.**

On 23 September, 2002, the Belgian law on euthanasia came into force. How had it been possible to open this difficult ethical debate, let alone succeed in passing a law, in a country like Belgium with a deeply Catholic background which at the beginning of the 1990s remained traumatized by the question of abortion?

## The Struggle to Decriminalize Euthanasia

After the April 1990 vote on the decriminalization of abortion, King Baudouin had made public the "serious problem of conscience" which confronted him. He was concerned that the proposed law would bring about a "decrease in respect for the life of those who are the weakest". The King thereby invoked his right to freedom of thought, which is the right of any citizen, and requested that Government and Parliament find a legal solution to the problem. The Prime Minister belonged to the CVP, the Flemish Catholic party. His party had opposed the passage of the law initiated by Parliament. The Government he presided over declared that, for one day, the King was unable to reign, during which interval the Government formalized the ratification and promulgation of the law.

One of the consequences of that painful debate was to render purely symbolic, during the final legislative periods, all efforts by Members of Parliament to introduce proposals concerning end-of-life decisions. The Catholic parties, and particularly the CVP, vetoed all such proposals. It was necessary to wait until the elections of 1999 and the formation of a government comprising six parties, including liberal, socialist, and green viewpoints but without the CVP. This "rainbow" coalition invited Parliament to take the initiative in matters of ethics, including the problems of end of life. The debate could no longer be muzzled.

The work of Parliament from 1999 until the vote on the euthanasia law on 16 May, 2002 is impossible to summarize; it included more than 40 Senate hearings and countless hours of discussion.

An important step had previously been achieved by the Consultative Committee on Bioethics which, in 1997, had declared the timeliness of legal regulation of euthanasia. Another contributory factor in influencing the climate was the result of a comparative survey conducted by the Universities of Brussels, Ghent (Belgium) and Nijmegen (Netherlands), published in the prestigious medical journal *The Lancet* in 2000, which revealed that in Belgium, which had no regulations on end-of-life decisions, three-quarters of medical decisions to interrupt life were reached without consulting the patient – the opposite of what happens in The Netherlands.

All the usual arguments of the opponents had been raised: the law goes too far; the law does not tackle the problem of children; we should first of all improve palliative care, following which there would no longer be

requests for euthanasia; it would initiate a slippery slope; the physicians know perfectly well what they have to do, therefore why to force them to make a declaration; and so on. The difference with previous decades was that the climate was sufficiently altered as to enable us to express our arguments without their being rejected out of hand.

## The Argument for Euthanasia

We do not deny that there is a viewpoint which asserts that, while a person may claim a right to live, he or she nevertheless has no right over ending his or her own life. Irrespective of how this viewpoint is justified, whether because of the Will of God or because of the fact that man is a social animal, this viewpoint is quite honourable and justifies the fact that those who share it reject for themselves the thought of shortening a life to which they confer a value inferior to none. This viewpoint was expressed in law by a strict condemnation of euthanasia.

However, one must recognize that such a viewpoint is no longer shared by all members of our society. There is a different viewpoint which places the autonomy of the person at the centre of the debate and which is shared also by some Catholic people who want to live their faith in freedom and responsibility.

Any pluralistic and democratic society must allow every citizen to live this last act of their life, that of choosing their own death, according to their private convictions; such a society must not fail to favour the coexistence of different concepts of the direction that one wishes to give to one's life or one's death, rather than allow one kind of morality to prevail over another. That freedom cannot be obtained clandestinely, that is, as long as euthanasia is criminalized, as long as the compassionate gesture of the physician who meets a request for euthanasia is indictable as that of an assassin. In other words, *the role of the law is not to impose one moral standard over another*; which was actually the case before the change of the law.

## Main Features of the Euthanasia Law

The new law is about autonomy, the right to choose, solidarity and freedom. Its main elements are as follows.

- The request of the patient is at the centre of the debate. Without this request, there is no question of euthanasia, defined as *the act, performed by a third person, in order to end the life of a person at the request of this person*. This is the same definition as in Dutch law. Indeed, the Dutch experience provided a valuable model, though the Belgian legislation takes account of the specificities of the Belgian situation.
- The Criminal Code remains unchanged but this specific law introduces the decriminalization of euthanasia if the physician follows the preconditions foreseen by the law.
- To avoid prosecution, the physician – and the physician alone – must respond only to the voluntary, written, well-thought-out and reiterated request by an adult patient who is in a serious and incurable medical condition, and experiencing unbearable physical or mental suffering. The physician must also inform the

patient of his state of health and life expectancy, and of the possible therapeutic measures and available palliative care.

- The physician must hold a consultation with a second physician.
- If death is not imminent, the physician must request a consultation with a third physician, either a psychiatrist or a specialist of the patient's pathology. In that case, a delay of at least one month between the request and the euthanasia has to be respected.
- As is the case in The Netherlands, there is a system of control. The physician has to declare the act of euthanasia to a Federal Commission composed of 8 physicians, 4 jurists and 4 persons from environments entrusted with the problems of patients suffering from an incurable disease. This Commission has a second mission: to establish every other year a statistical and evaluative report, and to suggest recommendations.
- The form of living will called "anticipated declaration" is officially recognized but strictly limited to those who will lapse into a state of irreversible unconsciousness.

Freedom and self-autonomy form the cornerstones of this law. No physician is bound to perform euthanasia. But the physician who, calling upon his right of freedom of conscience, refuses to perform euthanasia, must transfer the patient's medical record to a colleague of the patient's choosing.

A question that is raised very frequently is whether citizens of foreign countries can come to Belgium for euthanasia. The preconditions and procedure of the law clearly establish the principle of a strong doctor-patient relationship. Outside of this long-standing personal contact, it is not possible to consider conducting legal euthanasia.

**Conclusion**

The new law represents a very important step towards the right to choose. I must conclude with a special thought for Mario Verstraete who decided to die in beauty on 30 September of this year. Mario, a member of the board of the Dutch-speaking Association for the Right to Die in Dignity, was the only patient who was heard first-hand in the Senate hearing. He was suffering from multiple sclerosis. In full serenity, he spoke of his life and of his wish that his request to die in dignity be respected when he so decides. And he made his decision after the vote but had to wait until the law was enforced.

Goodbye, Mario. You were a fighter for this law of freedom and you may have been the first to call upon it. I shall remember you as a real lover of life. Let us hope that the lead given by The Netherlands and Belgium on euthanasia will soon be followed by other countries.

*Jacqueline Herremans is a lawyer. She is Centre d'Action Laïque's Representative to the IHEU General Assembly and President of the Belgian Right to Die Society (ADMMD).*

**European Council Recommendation 1418 on the Rights of the Dying**

**The Belgian law on euthanasia must be seen in the wider context of the efforts by right-to-die organizations at the European level. On 25 June, 1999, in the absence of a substantial number of its members, the Parliamentary Assembly of the European Council adopted Recommendation 1418, entitled "Protection of the human rights and dignity of the terminally ill and the dying". To a number of honourable proposals about living wills and the recognition of the right to refuse treatment, was added an explicit condemnation of euthanasia which upheld the absolute prohibition of intentionally putting an end to the life of incurable or dying patients, referring to Article 2 of the European Convention of Human Rights (which states that "no one shall be deprived of his life intentionally"); "recognising that a terminally ill or dying person's wish to die never constitutes any legal claim to die at the hand of another person"; and "recognising that a terminally ill or dying person's wish to die cannot of itself constitute a legal justification to carry out actions intended to bring about death".**

While one need not give this recommendation more importance than it deserved (since it had no constraining power), nevertheless opponents to the decriminalization of euthanasia repeatedly referred to it, embellished as it was by the aura of reference to the European Convention on Human Rights. Furthermore the European Court of Human Rights alluded to it in the recent case of Diane Pretty, whose request to die with dignity was rejected.

Has recommendation 1418 been superseded? It would certainly be premature to bury it. Nevertheless, it has been subjected to serious criticism and will in

**all likelihood turn out to be but a temporary stage, indeed a mistake, in the European Council's debate around end-of-life questions.**

Euthanasia, and in particular the new Dutch and Belgian legislation on the issue, was on the agenda of a hearing held in Paris in October 2002 by the Committee on Social Questions, Health, and Family. Mrs Gatterer, of the Austrian Parliament, whose report had initiated Recommendation 1418, presided. But the tone of the debate had changed since 1999. In contrast to the discussions that led to Recommendation 1418, the voices of those defending the right to die were heard: I was invited to speak, as was Dr. Michael Irwin, President of the World Federation of Right-to-Die Societies. Traditional voices, too, were heard of course. An observer representing the Holy See asserted that there was but one single morality – that derived from the Decalogue – and indulged in the shortcut between euthanasia and Nazism (to wide criticism).

Dick Marty, a member of the Swiss Parliament entrusted with preparing the report, concluded the session by stating that "the Belgian and Dutch legislators in no way stand accused. Whatever our judgment on their position, we should respect it – these are countries with a great humanist tradition, where life is clearly valued very highly... The 1999 decision of the Council of Europe against euthanasia does not stop there. The debate goes on."

*Jacqueline Herremans*

*Read IHEU's communication to the Council of Europe at [www.iheu.org](http://www.iheu.org).*

# Towards Equal Rights for the Non-Religious in Belgium

**The Belgian Constitution guarantees freedom of belief and opinion. Yet history demonstrates that the expression of these constitutionally entrenched principles was for a long time gravely to the disadvantage of the unbelieving citizen. Constitutional recognition of the social, philanthropic and moral value of non-confessional ideological communities in 1993 turned the tide. The Act of 21 June 2002 represents a further step towards equal rights.**

On 21 June, 2002, an Act concerning the Centrale Raad der niet-confessionele levensbeschouwelijke gemeenschappen van België (Central Council of Non-Confessional Ideological Communities in Belgium), the umbrella organization addressing management of the material and financial interests of the recognized non-confessional ideological communities in Belgium, was promulgated. By a pleasing coincidence, this occurred on the very day associated with the celebration of freethinking Humanism.

The Act is of great symbolic value to the non-confessional ideological communities in Belgium. Nine years after constitutional recognition of their existence, pluralism of ideologies and belief now has a secure position within the Belgian democratic polity. This new, important step towards equal rights strengthens the non-discrimination principle. The interim legislation that since 1981 had allowed the non-confessional ideological communities to develop a modest structure with limited resources was replaced by an Act that makes the Government accountable for their financing in a manner equal to that of recognized belief.

## **Ideological Pluralism and the Belgian Constitution**

The concept of ideological pluralism was first enshrined in the Belgian Constitution of 7 February, 1831 – one of the most progressive in Europe. It established the basis of a democratic state in which public freedom of belief, conscience, education, print and association were of foremost importance.

The Belgian situation is characterized by a secular notion of state, which recognizes a certain separation, within limits, between state and church, and their mutual independence. This is illustrated in three articles that determine the relationship between state and church: Article 19 of the Constitution guarantees freedom of belief, its free public practice and freedom of speech; Article 20 states “that nobody shall be coerced into participating in activities and ceremonies of a belief or to recognizing its days of rest”; and Article 21 declares that the state is in no way entitled to influence the appointment or induction of servers of any belief. The latter Article also states that civil marriage must always precede the marriage blessing.

The state respects the autonomy of its citizens and belief is a private issue. In Belgium, all citizens are free to believe in a deity and to decide whether or not they wish to profess their belief. Each belief community has

the right to organize itself as it sees fit. The state guarantees these freedoms by ensuring equal treatment of each individual and every private grouping. With this objective, the Act and the earlier Decree specifically guarantee the rights and freedoms of non-confessional ideological and philosophical minorities.

## **The Role of Officially Recognized Religions**

As mentioned above, the Belgian State has not opted for a consistent separation between church, ideology and state. It assumed from the start that a number of religions fulfil an important role in society. Consequently the Belgian State recognized them and provided them with financial resources so that they could fulfil what were seen to be their social duties. Paragraph 1 of Article 181 (formerly Article 117) of the Constitution ratifies the principle of this recognition. It states that “the salaries and pensions of the servers of beliefs shall be for the account of the state; the sums required shall each year be extracted from the budget”.

There are currently six recognized beliefs in Belgium: Catholic, Protestant, Anglican, Jewish, Islamic and Greek Orthodox. Irrespective of the fact that Article 181§1 only concerns salaries and pensions, this provision has also been the basis for allocation of other benefits, legal and financial. For recognized beliefs, this includes allocation of a system of servers of the belief at state cost; the attribution of institutions such as church factories as legal entities with financial intervention in shortcomings in their income; provision of Government support for repair and maintenance of buildings used by belief communities; housing grants for servers of beliefs; payment of counsellors of the belief in the army, prisons, and other public institutions; organization of instruction in the belief in the official curriculum; and allocation of airtime for religious broadcasts.

## **Financing of Recognized Beliefs**

Financing of recognized beliefs by the Government is based on the allotment of budget credit. The state collects taxes from taxpayers and allots a certain amount of the budget, mainly to payment of salaries and pensions of the servers of the beliefs. Additionally, municipalities and provinces, which are legally bound to cover the deficit of the church factories, use more than half of the funds granted to the beliefs mainly for ensuring maintenance and even restoration of church buildings and to support the costs of services.

The Belgian system includes various, fragmented sources of financing. The federal state and all other administrations (regions, communities, provinces and municipalities) contribute to the costs. Government subsidies represent the largest proportion of the church's income as required to cover the costs of practice of the belief. Current distribution of the annual budget credit is determined on the basis of the number of local belief communities recognized by the King. The criteria for recognition of the local belief communities vary randomly.

# Belgium – The New Belgian Law on Life Stances

By Anne France Ketelaer

## Achieving and Implementing Constitutional Recognition for Non-Confessional Communities

Alongside the recognized religious communities, the non-confessional ideology has grown significantly in Belgium, especially in the second half of the 20th century (see Humanism in Belgium). Since the foundation of freethinking organizations in the 19th century and the development of the non-confessional communities in the 1950s, they have become fully fledged ideological communities with their own identity. Free investigation, tolerance, freedom of judgement, personal accountability, the freedom to protest, emancipation, attaining citizenship, respect for human rights, pluralism, and so forth form the cornerstones of this identity. Freethinkers have argued that in order to take their rightful place in contributing to ethical debate, and in order to provide moral services based on non-confessional values for those who desire them, these communities are entitled to the same resources as those granted by Government to the recognized beliefs.

Initially the non-confessional ideological communities were granted a number of legal and regulatory provisions regarding financing of their operation and their infrastructure. These measures covered, for example, government subsidies intended for freethought activities, the development of services for moral support in public institutions such as prisons, hospitals, and the army, as well as the allocation of airtime for non-confessional broadcasts on radio and television, and development of the course on “non-confessional ethics” for schools.

Freethinkers and eminent politicians had been trying to ensure constitutional recognition of the non-confessional ideological communities by means of Article 117 of the Constitution since the 1970s. In 1980, it was decided to proceed with ensuring recognition in three phases: first, by giving a subsidy grant in 1980; secondly,

by drafting a decree to set an annual subsidy; and thirdly by ensuring official recognition. Article 117 was declared eligible for revision, but constitutional recognition for the non-confessional communities only became reality in May 1993, with Paragraph 2 of what was now Article 181, stating that “the salaries and pensions of the representatives of those organizations recognized by law as offering moral services on the basis of a non-confessional ideology shall be for the account of the state; the sums required shall each year be extracted from the budget”.

Efforts now focused on the effective implementation of this constitutional recognition. Negotiations began with the Justice Department regarding drawing up a bill to enforce Article 181§2. The Justice Department wished to force freethinking into a straightjacket that was a replica of the system for recognized beliefs. It has taken great efforts and energy to make it understood that a separate Act was required that would take account of the specific nature of non-confessional moral service. The result was the Act promulgated on 21 June, 2002.

As a result of the Act, central moral services are recognized and financed for each non-confessional ideological community. Centres of moral services will be established by administrative district. Each provincial capital will have a statutory institution charged with management of the financial interests of the province's moral service centres, with two such institutions – one Dutch and one French-speaking – for the Brussels-Capital district.

The Act represents a significant advance for Humanism in Belgium, and will perhaps also be an inspiration to Humanists worldwide.

*Anne France Ketelaer is Joint-Secretary General of UVV, a Full Member Organization of IHEU*

## Humanism in Belgium

**Humanism has a long tradition in Belgium. In a country occupied by many invading armies before independence in 1830, “tolerance” developed a very specific meaning. The ideals of the French Revolution were reflected and partly realized through our Constitution: freedom of religion, freedom of education, freedom of union, freedom of press and the separation of church and state.**

**The Catholic Church immediately opposed these fundamental liberties, driving liberals into a stance against the Church. From 1845 onwards, Catholics and liberals formed two clearly separated and mutually hostile camps. The first “non-confessional” organizations arose at the Universities of Ghent and Brussels, but in 1854 L’Affranchissement (Deliverance) was founded. A number of freethinking organizations were soon established and the first recorded international meeting between freethinkers occurred in Antwerp in 1880!**

**The horrors of World War II brought a fresh and determined effort to create a new, decent, Humanist**

**society. The Humanistisch Verbond (Humanist Union) was established in 1951 and adhered to IHEU at the first Amsterdam Congress. In 1966 the Unie Vrijzinnige Verenigingen (Union of Freethinking Communities, UVV) was founded as the representative body for the Flemish freethinking organizations, and the Centre d’Action Laïque (CAL) for the Walloon Provinces. The Central Council of the non-confessional ideological Communities in Belgium (Central Council of Freethinking) was born as an umbrella organization for the two in 1972.**

**Such is the historical context within which the efforts to establish constitutional recognition for non-confessional communities – efforts that do not go against the continuing aim of complete separation of church and state – should be understood. Belgium has made major strides in the last few years under the leadership of Humanists. But traditions are strong and we must watch over our hard-won achievements!**

*Sonja Eggerickx, Vice-President of IHEU and of UVV  
Anne France Ketelaer*

# Gujarat Election: Dangerous Portents

By Jayanti Patel

The intensely followed election in the western state of Gujarat, India, is over and its results out. The state had been the site of horrific communal violence in early 2002, in which over 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, were killed in retaliation for the carnage at Godhra, in which 58 died when a train carrying Hindu supporters of a Ram temple at Ayodhya was set ablaze. The role of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government and its supporters like the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Bajrang Dal during that agonizing period had already exposed their fascist character to the world. When the elections were declared, it was hoped that people would reject these fascist forces and sanity would return. Sadly, that was not to be. The BJP has not only returned to power under Chief Minister Narendra Modi, but has increased its majority. Apart from the possible long-term ramifications, these results in themselves are perturbing and augur ill for the future. Furthermore, the issues that were given precedence during the election campaign, and the response of the voting public, show trends dangerous to India's democracy, its survival as a nation state, and to hopes for the development of a just and civilized society.

## BJP Rule

It was clear from the dissolution of Gujarat's assembly and the demand for elections within three months of it by the BJP that it was planning to take advantage of the poison of communal hatred, fear and religious frenzy which had become pervasive in the wake of the Godhra incident and the subsequent riots. In the previous election, the BJP's slogan had been "freedom from fear, starvation and corruption". In this election, they were not even referred to in passing, and for obvious reasons: fear was widespread, large sections of the population were facing starvation and corruption had already come to be legitimized. Hence any mention of governance, let alone good governance, was to be avoided.

The BJP's "governance" has been more conspicuous by its absence. Its efforts at relief following the devastating earthquake of 2001 had been severely criticized (in fact it lost all the seats in the worst affected area of Kutch, including those of sitting ministers). The party's attempt to claim success in bringing water from the Narmada Project were scarcely persuasive as the Congress Party was widely known to have been responsible for much of the development of the project. The communal riots, which continued for three months, had severely affected Gujarat's economy, as well as causing untold human suffering, and leaving thousands homeless. The burden of debt had skyrocketed. Public life stood totally disrupted. Political bickering within the BJP had increased, and the state government's lack of effective response to (and reported actual encouragement of) the mayhem of death and destruction unleashed by the mob, mainly against Muslims, had been widely condemned. Indeed, a nine-member tribunal inquiring into the Godhra violence declared that Modi "is liable for prosecution for genocide for refusal to take

any preventive measure to protect the lives and properties of minorities in the state". Despite his oath of office, Narendra Modi and his BJP colleagues have shown scant respect for the principle of equality irrespective of creed enshrined in the Indian Constitution. Yet none of this has deterred people from voting Modi and the BJP back into power.

## Election Strategy

How was such an election victory achieved? It seems astonishing that a government which encouraged murder, rape, collective killings, destruction, burning and the plunder of houses and shops, far from hiding its face in shame, on the contrary passes it off as a form of glory (*gaurav*). Those who opposed and condemned these barbarous acts, those who pointed their fingers at the guilty, became branded as anti-Hindu and pro-Muslim, as the enemies of Gujarat and of India. And this openly brazen propaganda became widely accepted – an example of a blatant lie repeated frequently enough to be swallowed by people as truth.

To spread such a belief effectively, it was necessary to suppress any feelings of guilt. In this context, the following comments were widely heard: "the *mivans* [a derogatory term for Muslim in Gujarat] had become too overbearing... It was necessary to teach them a lesson...Why should we be at the receiving end all the time?...Congress and others have appeased them too much...They are wrongly supported and pampered by the secularists...All Muslims favour Pakistan". Naturally, where such a psychological climate prevails, the politics of hatred would acquire legitimacy even if of a dubious kind. Modi not only took advantage of these beliefs but used his propaganda machinery to reinforce them.

Despite a postponement of the election date, Modi's strategy of keeping alive anti-Muslim feeling and maintaining its equivalence with anti-Pakistan feeling in the minds of Gujarat's Hindus was helped by the terrorist attacks on Akshardham and other temples, which he lost no opportunity in exploiting. A fatwa by a Muslim organization exhorting Muslims to use their vote against communalist forces was widely publicized by the BJP, which responded with a highly effective counter-campaign. Even on the morning of polling day, media images of Muslim voters were used to whip up a massive Hindu response. The voter turnout was a record 63%.

## Propagation of Communal Hatred

The greatest issue of concern regarding this election is that the agenda of the party that was voted into power in the state contains no indication of any policy of governance or economic programme related to the real needs of the people. The slogan offering removal of fear and eradication of starvation and corruption having been shelved, there remained only a one-point programme: the dominance of Hindu nationalism, and unflinching acceptance of this dominance by other communities in India. Here, there is no scope for tolerance, equality, or working together towards building a nation. There is no talk even of progress, economic

development, or the uplifting of the downtrodden.

Yet the extraordinary fact is that this is not a programme of the BJP; neither is this a programme of India's Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee or his hardline Home Minister, L. K. Advani. It is the programme of the VHP and its leaders, such as Pravin Togadia. Hence it could be concluded that this was not the victory of the BJP but of the fundamentalist Togadia. Indeed, it must be seen not as the victory of a particular political party but of the forces that advocate religious fanaticism, that advocate exclusion and the dominance and ascendancy of one group over others. This election result has strengthened such forces. And while Modi was skilful in utilizing the terrorist attacks in his election propaganda, the fact remains that the opposition failed to respond effectively. Groups opposed to communal enmity failed to reach the masses and arm them with the understanding that is the only defence against communal hatred.

The Congress Party had based its election strategy around traditional caste loyalties and was the dominant political force at the village *Panchayat* level. Although caste divisions in Gujarat are becoming blurred, they have been exploited effectively in previous elections. But in this election they were not the decisive factor. The force of the caste system has diminished in society, but communal loyalty has taken its place: the Congress Party had failed to gauge correctly the strength of anti-Muslim sentiment pervading the people's psyche.

### Challenging Communalism

Following their victory in Gujarat, the Hindu nationalists

have been heartened in their aim to spread Hindu dominance throughout India. Their threats against the secularists who stand in their way grow more aggressive. It is clearly imperative to understand the foundations of their ideology.

Communist forces, whether Hindu or Muslim, are not concerned with development or the eradication of poverty. They are against equality, progress, and the building of a modern society based on universal human values. They are inimical to democracy, modernization and secularization. They strive to maintain and strengthen traditional divisions and orthodoxy. They profess faith in the authority of religious texts and rituals and manipulate religious faith by exploiting religious causes such as that of Ayodhya and inciting people to violence in the name of religion. They are therefore strongly opposed to rationalism and freedom of thought. In their strategy of "divide and rule", they are the real inheritors of the mantle of India's former colonial masters.

In fighting these forces, education plays a central role. Democratic and Humanist values must be spread among the masses. To challenge aggressive organizations such as the VHP effectively, all democratic, rationalist, egalitarian and secular groups must develop a coordinated programme and use a variety of strategies. For the protection of democracy, for the preservation of our culture, for economic development and the realization of a peaceful and humane society, there is no escape from this fight.

*Prof. Jayanti Patel is President of the Indian Radical Humanist Association, and has specialized in collective social violence studies.*

## AMOFI: Fighting Caste and Religious Bigotry in India

*By Hippu Salk Kristle Nathan*

**AMOFI (Anti-Caste Marriage & One-Child Family Organization of India) is an atheist social reform organization. Founded on 10 December, 1980, AMOFI has been following the ideology of the Universal Declaration of Human rights, 1948, and the Preamble to the Constitution of India, 1950. It seeks to achieve the goal of a Humanist and equal society in India through "anti-caste marriage". The caste system is a system of inequality bred and fed by false pride and prejudices. It has been maintained through the endogamous marriage code and blind beliefs perpetuated by religious scriptures such as the Bhagavad Gita and the so-called divine epics of the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Parents have traditionally followed caste patriarchy in deciding and regulating the marriage of their sons and daughters. This ancient tradition continues to pollute the socio-political and economic system of the country. In response, AMOFI has been organizing atheist love marriages and exogamous marriages that will help to break the caste system and weaken the hold of caste patriarchy. It has, up to February 2002, organized 1455 atheist (priest-less, caste-less, dowry-less) love marriages.**

**But AMOFI's efforts in social development issues do not stop with casteless marriages. India is grossly overpopulated, having about 17% of the world**

**population over its share of 2.3% of the land area of the world. The massive economic inequalities of India have been exacerbated by its rate of population growth. Overpopulation has also led to deforestation and degradation of the environment. To achieve both better standards of life and a greener environment, AMOFI promotes the idea of the one-child family as the norm.**

**Religion is the common if not the sole root of many of India's most profound problems. How much would be gained by the destitute if the vast material resources that lie in the hands of religious authorities were to be utilized for the benefit of the poor! AMOFI appeals to atheists and Humanists to take an active part in politics, to create their own democratic party, so that they can tell people of the harm perpetrated by India's religions and the conflicts between them. The damage begins early, with the poisoning of young minds in religious schools, most particularly the Saraswati Sisu Mandirs of the right-wing Hindu Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Madrasas run by fundamentalist Muslims. From these spring the communal violence that plagues the country. That is why atheists and Humanists must above all concentrate on education of the young – on freeing the minds of children, the future citizens of the world.**

# “I Will Never Be Silenced”

by *Taslima Nasrin*



**What follows is a slightly adapted version of a speech addressed by the exiled Bangladeshi writer and activist Taslima Nasrin to the European Parliament in Strasbourg, France, on 17 December, 2002. Taslima was a member of IHEU's UNESCO NGO delegation, 1999–2000.**

“I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude for your having invited me to the European Parliament in commemoration of the anniversary of my having received the Sakharov Prize in 1994. I am proud to be one of the winners of the Sakharov Prize. Receiving this esteemed prize helped greatly to give me the inspiration and courage to go on with my struggle for equality and justice for everybody, whatever their religion and gender.

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought. This, of course, is *the* basic human right. But, shockingly, very few people in some countries enjoy this freedom. They are not encouraged to think differently, not allowed to do things differently.

I came from a country where religious fundamentalists, including governmental authorities, denied my freedom to have thoughts different from their own. As punishment, they demanded my execution by hanging. I was forced to leave my own country. I had to pay heavily for the sole reason that I believe in human rights and freedom of expression. For more than a decade, I have been struggling to help people understand the importance of freedom of thought, which is an essential part of human rights as well as of democracy. Like me, thousands of fellow sufferers have had the same struggle. Some are in prison, some in exile.

The fundamentalists are increasing in number. People, afraid to oppose the fundamentalists, keep their mouths shut. It is really very difficult to make people move against a sensitive issue like religion. Yet religion is the

source of fundamentalism. Probably we will not be able to see any dramatic change in Muslim society, for it is in the backyard of modern history. But we should not give up; we have to fight the fundamentalists to create a better world.

All religions are oppressive to women. All religions are against democracy, human rights and freedom of expression. So, in the West, we see the separation of state and church. But most of the Muslim countries still have 7th-century Sharia law, in which women are oppressed, human rights are violated and freedom of expression is not respected. Now, secularization of Islamic countries is urgently necessary as well as secular education instead of religious education. We cannot create any good by using bombs.

I am not a pessimistic person. I believe that if the silent majority were to protest against those who believe in irrational blind faith and who want to go backwards instead of forwards, who are for tradition not innovation, who oppose individualism and plurality of thought, then the world would become a truly civilized place in which to live. To eradicate poverty and illiteracy, to rid it of dogma, bigotry, and all kinds of obscurantism, to bring light to the darkness, what is urgently needed is worldwide enlightenment.

Freedom of expression for some is not enough. We must work for the freedom of expression for all.

Human rights for some is not enough. We must work for the human rights of all.

Justice for some is not enough. We must work for justice for all.

Peace for some is not enough. All must be free from violence and aggression.

I, come what may, will not be silenced. Come what may, I will continue my fight for equality and justice without any compromise until my death. Come what may, I will never be silenced.”

## EMPOWERING WOMEN IN THE HUMANIST MOVEMENT International Women's Conference

A survey of Humanist organizations worldwide indicates the general absence of women in positions of responsibility. The gender imbalance in the organized International Humanist Movement needs to be addressed.

How can Humanism's commitment to Women's Rights and Equality be translated into organizational terms? How can the situation be redressed without resorting to useless tokenism? How can the realities on the ground be changed? What might be the reasons why women do not become active members of Humanist organizations? When they do become active, what are the problems they face? Are there specific women's issues that Humanists need to take up? Do Humanist women have similar concerns across the continents? How many of their problems are linked with the general issues connected with sustainable development and human rights issues and need to be addressed within that particular framework?

Is there a justification for a women's wing in IHEU or a specialist Humanist Organization for Women – or a Women's Organization for Humanists? In short, how can women really be *empowered* within the Humanist Movement?

IHEU is proposing an International 2-day Humanist Women's Conference on the above theme to be held in the last part of 2003 in London. An online conference will also be held leading up to the main conference. IHEU recommends that all IHEU Member Organizations depute a representative to this important conference. A limited number of travel scholarships will be available for speakers and participants from the Third World.

Those interested in speaking should contact [women@iheu.org](mailto:women@iheu.org) before 15 April with their full contact details, and theme of proposed intervention.

# Bringing it all Back Home

by Anne Shaw

It may be true that “the issue of women’s emancipation has become a buzzword the world over” (Humanism and Women’s Rights in Nigeria, Dr. C.O. Isiramem, *IHN*, July 2002), and we are reading many articles about the extremes of oppression and cruelty meted out to women in Muslim countries. Be it the rape and pillage of war, or the maiming and enslaving of women in the name of religion, it is women and children who are the victims, and it is men who carry it out. (This is not, of course, to say that *all* men rape and pillage.) It has always been so but at last the media, including the secular press, is excited enough about it to devote print space to describing horror stories – more or less luridly depending upon the country’s usefulness and compliance with the national interest. I am not complaining about this, since the credit for the current exposure of such treatment must go to the courageous women activists and resisters of oppression, as well as women reporters and journalists who have travelled to see for themselves and exposed the conditions in Muslim countries.

However, it should not be supposed that should Muslim women gain the freedom of British women, that would be the end of the story. For, at the present rate, they would find that many British men have found more subtle ways of suppressing the troublesome women who keep trying to get in on the act: ways that do not involve cruelty, or attract attention, but are none-the-less effective in keeping women’s views off the agenda.

We in the West pride ourselves on our liberated state. Many sisters regard feminism as no longer relevant, and for clever, educated young women with qualifications and careers that enable them to be economically independent, that may well be true. Yet for most women Dr Isiramem’s description of women’s status in Nigeria could, except for the extremes of Sharia Law in the north, equally apply to them. Women who want to participate in the decision-making process and be treated as equals by men will, in many fields of activity, find themselves not only under a glass ceiling, but in a glass box.

We should not forget how recent women’s emancipation is in Western countries such as Britain. It is still within living memory that women were “given” the vote, and the last witch was hanged. Even at the beginning of the last century women were hobbled in long skirts and corsets, refused entry to many institutions of higher education, and expected to give up their jobs on marriage. Still, today, women are barred from some golf clubs, social clubs and secret societies, but more importantly suffer continued discrimination in the workplace, in pay and pensions provision, the effects of exclusion from the “old boy” networks and effective representation in government and parliament. This may be nothing in comparison to the *burka*, but the position of Western men compared to men in Muslim countries is not so very far ahead in some respects!

From an atheist point of view, much of the development of sexism stems from the position of

inferiority assigned to women by the “great” monotheistic male-dominated religions. Their conservatism and the relegation of women, non-white and disabled people by clerics of all kinds to a subservient position alongside children has had the effect of stifling human progress. In our modern and largely secular Western society, there is still discrimination in many fields, including institutional suppression through the continuing influence of religion in the supposedly secular organizations of government, education and commerce.

So what of the Humanist Movement: is it in the vanguard of equal rights for women? I think not. No doubt there is a verbal commitment, sincerely meant, but if you look at its structures, organization, journals, membership and culture, you will find a very uneven picture. While some come out of such an exercise quite well, you will find that others, while paying lip service, show disturbing similarities with churches and other traditional institutions. You will find “the statutory woman”, the “woman on a pedestal”, journals with almost all male writers, content and appeal. And if you question, you will hear the same excuses as are always made by people blind to discrimination: “women are not interested”, “their language is too bland” and even “they do not write about things that atheists are interested in”!

The spur to this article came from reading several interesting and informative articles in the 2002 Commemorative Issue of *International Humanist News*. Although female contributions were in a substantial minority, nevertheless it compared favourably with others. Some atheist and humanist journals are indeed using more women writers than in the past, but they are still grossly underrepresented. It is particularly notable how often female writers only get into print on women’s issues. These journals are of course not alone in this; if you compare them with the major broadsheet newspapers you will find the same phenomenon. Be that as it may, I think we should expect better from the Humanist Movement.

For any woman to attempt to challenge the status quo on sexism always attracts indignation. Even people who would argue most strongly against prejudice, and are themselves members of minorities that are discriminated against, can be blind to this form of discrimination, deep seated as it is. The religions will only change in response to demand, their doctrines and practice are rigid, but they will, as they always have done, accommodate changes in society when they are forced to. The freethought movement, too, will eventually have to change in this respect: there can be no excuse for people who would campaign vigorously for human rights, against sectarianism, racial discrimination and homophobia to discriminate against women.

*[The (female) editor of this Humanist journal would like to stress that she welcomes contributions from women Humanists – and not only on “women’s issues”.]*

# A Youth Perspective

*By Malgosia Minta, Polish Humanist Association*

Since 1989, Poland has gone through deep and often chaotic changes that have strongly affected young people. The crisis in politics, with its impact on the economy and social life, has shaped their way of thinking and their lives. Young people in Poland are often insecure, alienated and lonely. At the same time, however, the crisis has strengthened their need for a clear set of values and a well-defined worldview that might help them to find their own way in this new reality. Many still embrace religion, although the number of believers among teenagers is rapidly falling. It is no surprise that Humanism is becoming more popular among intelligent young people as an alternative and more relevant life stance.

Humanism has gained support and has become highly valued because it is free from any religious baggage, it is ethical and it deals with real human concerns, including those of young people. There are many young people who subscribe to Humanist values, who advocate Humanist solutions and would like to join the Humanist Movement. Quite often, however, they feel isolated, and are unaware that there are other Humanists around.

The reason for that is simple – being an open atheist in Poland is still regarded as being immoral, insensitive and even a threat to Polish national identity. Catholic pressure is still very strong, partly because the church has enjoyed the full support of all Polish governments, regardless of their political identity. All political parties, both left and right, are in favour of religious classes in schools, for example. Luckily, the situation is changing, even though very slowly. We need more courage, more passion and more work to spread the Humanist message and empower those young people who want to be independent in creating their life stance.

One important challenge for Humanism in Poland is in the treatment of children within the health care system. The rights of young people are not respected in

hospitals and clinics. Those under 18 have no say at all in their hospital treatment and only parents are given information, as well as decision-making power. That is why, in our Charter of Youth's Rights, we have proposed, among other things, that young people over 15 years of age should have the right to decide about the treatment they are subjected to. This proposal, which sounds rather unrealistic in today's Poland, is mainly aimed at raising social awareness about the quality of paediatric service in the country. The young should no longer be treated as brainless objects! Although they are obviously less experienced, they are aware enough of their own selves, and would feel much more secure if they were provided with information regarding their treatment, in language that they can understand. Such recognition of the young patient's needs and feelings appears to be confined to private clinics accessible to few.

Within the home, young people do not seem to realize that they have a right to stand up against physical and emotional abuse. The only practical way out for a child suffering abuse is to run away from home, which is hardly a suitable solution for children, who are by nature vulnerable. Yet social workers in Poland have been known to advise children to do just that, in order that they should receive help from the state in orphanages and day-care centres. Nevertheless, parents are not always deprived of their rights, and then continue to control and abuse them. This loophole in Polish civil law has caused some tragic incidents.

We advocate giving teenagers more freedom and more rights. We try to encourage social debate and make society and the authorities more sensitive to young peoples' rights to respect and equality. Such initiatives as the Charter of Youth's Rights drawn up by the Polish Humanist Association seek to ensure a better future for both young people and adults.

## IHEYO Youth Conference 2003

*29 August–2 September, Berlin, Germany*

Following the highly successful 2002 International Humanist Youth Conference, IHEYO, the youth section of IHEU, is organizing a follow-up. This will once more provide an opportunity for young Humanists around the world to learn from each other and exchange ideas. The 2003 Conference will be held in Berlin, Germany, from 29 August to 2 September. IHEYO will co-organize the conference with the German JuHu's, the youth organization of the Humanistischer Verband Deutschlands. The programme will consist of interesting workshops, discussions about Humanism, a city game and visits to local (youth) Humanist activities.

Part of the conference will be dedicated to IHEYO's first General Assembly, in which participants will vote on a constitution that will transform IHEYO into a youth section with a formal democratic structure and elected leadership.

For more details about the conference and the latest news, please visit the IHEYO website, [www.iheyo.org](http://www.iheyo.org), or e-mail [youth@iheu.org](mailto:youth@iheu.org).

## IHEYO ONLINE – The World Wide Humanist Youth Database

After months of preparation, the World Wide Humanist Youth Database has been launched! This database provides very easy access to information about all kinds of Humanist youth organizations and activities around the world. It also gives contact details of all the groups included. At present there is information about 22 national Humanist organizations and their youth activities. Several of these organizations are established Humanist youth organizations. In the coming months the database will be expanded. But it is already more than worthwhile to check out the database and discover the world of youth Humanism!

For the database, please go to [www.iheu.org/youth/database.htm](http://www.iheu.org/youth/database.htm) or simply via [www.iheyo.org](http://www.iheyo.org).

# Humanism in Latin America – a Less-Than-Easy Choice

By Hugo Estrella

Latin America is a continent with a curse: the established church. The church was from the beginning the tool of the conquerors: the Sword and the Cross. Ever since, the church has been the key point of reference for every political and social movement. Because of the lack of public education, politics in Latin America has almost invariably been a matter for the elite. And, mainly through the Jesuits, the Catholic Church has been the only group that educated our elites. Despite efforts at social change by enlightened priests, the point of reference has firmly remained the dogma and rhetoric of the Catholic Church.

At the time of independence, and despite the Pope's Bull against republicanism, some clergymen supported revolution. Their views were therefore reflected in the new constitutions that referred to God or to established religion as a matter for the state. In many cases this was to change later, when liberal governments separated church and state. Universal secular education, civil marriage and the secularization of cemeteries are a legacy of those times for many countries, particularly Brazil, Chile and Uruguay. Mexico followed, after the 1910 Revolution, and is an interesting case of a country that never recognized the Catholic Church and banned public religious demonstrations. This prohibition was only overturned in the 1990s, by Carlos Salinas, arguably the most corrupt President in Mexican history, at the beginning of the end for the long-lasting revolutionary regime. The change was not for the better.

Religion was also prominent at the time of the Cold War. Many countries, like Argentina, became increasingly influenced by the Catholic Church acting as a branch of political power. Military chiefs understood that religion worked as a sort of anti-Communist vaccine. Being religious meant being a better citizen, beyond suspicion. Hiding behind the authority of the church, the government eliminated thousands of its young people, the "desaparecidos", and forced thousands of intellectuals into exile. Cuba, the then axis of evil, became the enemy, joined later by Nicaragua. But many priests took the so-called "Choice for the Poor", based on the Puebla Declaration. Some went further, like the Colombian Camilo Torres, who became a guerrilla fighter and died in combat. Catholic views, then, were represented on both sides of the line. And many people in the middle were killed, and are still being killed today.

Today, Latin America is undergoing major changes. The demise of Soviet Communism opened a ray of hope, and it became possible to dream of a liberal and Humanist future. It might have taken decades to achieve, but a cultural revolution had begun. Hope, though, was again snatched away as international creditors began imposing tougher and tougher adjustments on our economies. It is the poor now who are being asked to repay the debts run up by years of corruption and mismanagement, and millions are being pushed into the direst poverty.

Every year, millions of children are born into a hopeless life. Our governments are impotent or worse, indeed are

part of the problem, as the prevailing neo-liberal worldview bars them from serious social action. Social action and care for the poor is once again left to Catholic institutions and NGOs (or, like Caritas, GO-NGOs, government-funded non-governmental organizations). The result is that abortion, modern contraceptive methods and anti-AIDS campaigns are off limits. Conservative Catholics say "they must have all of the children sent by God". (They never say "we".) Progressive Catholics say "they have the right to have all children they want, and the state should ensure them a life with dignity". "They" are seldom asked, or given the chance to make reasoned choices. "They" have become a zoological category, fodder for empty democracies and authoritarian "revolutions". And, of course, good for business. Every year high salaries are paid to the bureaucrats and professionals of these GO-NGOs, and millions are raised both nationally and internationally to support their work; work that is necessary, but which will change nothing in the long run.

It is here that Humanists and Humanism have failed. Yes, we struggle for important things, like secular education, same-sex marriage, freedom to use IUDs and so forth. These are important issues. But we need to reach more of the people. Without abandoning our concern for separation of church and state, we should deliver our message, and our aid, to those who are in greatest need. The Bush administration, swayed by the American Christian Right, has cut all programmes and funds that might support abortion or other women's rights. This has seen the end of many NGOs that had worked for decades in the field. Meanwhile, Europe is more concerned with the former Communist countries and Africa, and Latin America is, once again, the forgotten backyard of the Giant.

Ideological control still works even today. There are several festering scandals in Latin America of priests raping children, as many or even more than in the US, but they hardly ever get coverage in the press – or come to trial. Domestic Humanist groups are networking via the Internet, and promoting debate on these and other pressing issues. But we need to grow, to make this movement a powerful one. Most scientists, and many highly educated people are Humanists. But they need to know that there is a way to make Humanism happen. IHEU can and should be a more vocal international voice in assisting our national efforts to make our domestic laws more progressive. And a strong Humanist aid agency is needed to do the fieldwork that otherwise will always remain a vehicle for religious propaganda. Except in Brazil, Uruguay and Chile, it is hard to live as a Humanist in Latin America and much harder to be a militant Humanist. Only fraternal support from like-minded people and the "umbrella" of IHEU make it possible for us to go on. But we are committed to Humanism and believe that is our best hope for a better future.

Remember us, and talk to IHEU if you want to help.

*Hugo Estrella is IHEU Growth and Development Representative for Latin America.*

# Humanism in America Takes a Political Turn

By Larry Jones

## A New Coalition

In the past few decades, Christian fundamentalism has taken an increasingly strident political stance in America. Beginning with televangelist preacher Jerry Falwell and his Moral Majority, followed by Reverend Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition, Christian fundamentalists have obtained virtual control of the Republican Party, the party that now controls all three branches of the Federal government in the United States. The Humanist response, on the other hand, has been at best anaemic.

An attempt was made in February, 2000, to galvanize the American Humanist movement into a cooperative alliance that would speak with one amplified voice on issues affecting the interests of non-believers. The Coalition for the Community of Reason (CCR), as the alliance was then called, is still in existence today, but it lacks focus, a corporate structure, by-laws, and a mission of its own. The reason this attempt failed is in itself interesting and speaks volumes about what is fundamentally wrong with the Humanist movement in America today: it failed because two of the national organizations belonging to the coalition saw CCR as a competitor.

The good news is that a new organization has arisen – the Secular Coalition for America (SCA), which was incorporated as a not-for-profit 501(c)4 organization in November of 2002. SCA is the first Humanist organization to have 501(c)4 status. This gives it the licence to lobby legislatures extensively on a state and national level. If Humanism is ever to have influence in the world, Humanists must influence the policymakers. With SCA, we now have the vehicle for representing the Humanist viewpoint to those policymakers. The founding organizations are: Atheist Alliance International, Institute for Humanist Studies, Internet Infidels, and the Secular Student Alliance. All the members are fully committed to the mission of political activism for Humanism, which bodes well for the long-lived success of SCA.

The founding members of SCA anticipate that additional Humanist and other freethought groups in America will join the coalition, making it a powerful voice for change in the political environment of this country. We ask only that prospective members be organizations of national or international scope and that they are committed to cooperation and political activism.

## The Godless America March



By kind permission of the Institute of Humanist Studies.

On a beautiful day, in early November of last year, some 2000 atheists, Humanists, and other freethinkers converged on Washington D.C. to demonstrate for a Godless America. The Godless America March on Washington was organized and sponsored by the American Atheists and it presented a unique opportunity for Humanists to unite in a show of strength with their sister freethought organizations. Historically, the freethought movement in America has allowed itself to be divided by labels and simplistic definitions. The march gave us the opportunity to show the rest of America that non-believers in this country can no longer be ignored.

The Institute for Humanist Studies, located in Albany, New York, which is about 400 miles north of Washington, chartered a bus, bringing about 20 Godless folks to the demonstration. This was typical for other organizations as well, some of whom sent members across the entire country. There were about two dozen speakers, loud music and of course Christian hecklers with bullhorns shouting "Jesus saves", "atheism is the road to Hell" and so on, which lent a carnival atmosphere to the festivities. A good time was had by all. We even received press coverage in some of the major newspapers. But the most important benefit of the march was that it brought together and energized the freethought movement in America. Hopefully this will become an annual event.

*Larry Jones is founder and President of the Institute of Humanist Studies and a Vice-President of IHEU.*



By kind permission of the Institute of Humanist Studies.

# Humanism in Ethiopia

By Gebregeorgis Yohannes

Ethiopia is one of the ancient countries in Africa and for centuries it has been isolated from the rest of the world. Edward Gibbons, the historian, wrote in *The Rise and fall of the Roman Empire*, "Ethiopians slept for nearly three thousand years forgetful of the world by whom they were forgotten". Even today Ethiopians are not fully awake and still cling awkwardly to the past. The Orthodox Christian faith, which was established in the 4th century AD, is totally home grown with deeply ingrained superstitions, rituals and beliefs that include elements of ancient Judaism. Islam also came to Ethiopia shortly after some of the followers of Mohammed arrived there to escape persecution in Arabia.

Both Christianity and Islam are deeply entrenched in Ethiopia. Unlike other African countries that have been exposed to Western thought, Ethiopia, which was not colonized except for a brief period of 5 years, itself created most of its own modern infrastructure, and has therefore lagged behind in developing a sense of connectedness to new ideas and philosophies. With this background, Ethiopians are very rigidly Orthodox and never question their faith. However, in the last 50 years or so missionaries from Europe and the US have infiltrated Ethiopian society and have converted millions into their sects. The most popular of these new religions are Adventists, Protestants, Jehovah's witnesses, Catholics, and Protestants. Recently the Mormons have also established a foothold in the highly populated capital city.

Even the Moonies are vying for their share and in the last few years have planted their agents in the universities, masquerading as students of culture but who actually seek out converts aggressively. The Moonies are working very hard and treacherously by forming such fancy-sounding organizations as "women's federation for world peace".

Most young people in Ethiopia consider the Ethiopian Orthodox Church too old-fashioned. When new religions appear with a very aggressive proselytizing campaign, these youngsters easily fall prey, assuming that they have found some new and better truth. If they were presented with the idea of Humanism with its openness and unthreatening and reasoned philosophy, young people would easily relate to it. But where such an alternative doesn't exist, they would embrace any new

cult that is aggressive and cunning. One of our members is a former university student who had joined the Moonies a few years ago. When I met this young woman at the University and introduced her to Humanism she was very receptive. She had been full of doubts about her previous religious experiences, first as an Orthodox, then as a Pentecostal and finally as a Moonie. But she could not articulate these doubts. She had never had the opportunity to find out about Humanism but had experienced all the falsehoods and bigotry of organized cults. What she had needed was the invigorating idea of Humanism with its appeal to reason and self-respect rather than fear and punishment.

The opportunity for the Ethiopian Humanist Organization (EHO) to reach out to thousands of young people is readily available. The challenge is to have the resources to reach to them. African Americans for Humanism have provided us with several hundred books and regularly send us *Free Inquiry* magazine, which our members enjoy reading. We have been able to establish a presence on the Internet with support from AAH.

The goals of EHO are to make Humanist philosophy and thinking easily and readily available to Ethiopians, particularly the youth. EHO aims to reach out to thousands of young Ethiopians, particularly those in higher education, with the specific goal of adding at least 20–50 members in one year. It plans to produce a brochure explaining Humanism and EHO, and will publish a quarterly newsletter that would be distributed to members, potential members and others. Other plans for which we are currently seeking funding include conducting studies of superstitions, and gathering information on issues related to separation of church and state.

The broader impact of our activity will be to introduce this new idea of Humanism, to have people become aware and ask questions, and encourage a new and bold approach to a scientific method of inquiry. Another effect of our activity will be to inculcate in people the ability to feel worthwhile, to feel human and capable of changing their circumstances without relying on supernatural forces and other illusions.

*Gebregeorgis Yohannes is founder of the Ethiopian Humanist Organization which is receiving IHEU support to establish itself.*

## FUNDING FOR HUMANISM! IHEU–HIVOS

### Humanist Networking and Development Programme 2002–2004

IHEU is pleased to announce a three-year funding programme to support Humanist organizations in Third World countries.

Over £35,000 (€56,000, US\$56,000) will be available annually for projects with a Humanist bias. By Humanist bias, IHEU means (as an illustration only) projects such as those relating to separation of religion and state; inculcation of scientific temper; support to Humanists/atheists subjected to discrimination because of their life stance, including victims of similar discrimination such as children,

women, homosexuals, physicians involved in voluntary euthanasia and abortion, etc; social, legal and intellectual defence of the right to self-determination and other human rights.

Applications are currently being accepted for the next phase of funding.

Full details and application forms can be obtained from IHEU's website at [www.iheu.org](http://www.iheu.org).

# Reports from the UN

*By Sylvain and Phyllis Ehrenfeld*

## The Use of Dialogue: The Values Caucus and the Iranian Ambassador

Is dialogue possible when the partners' differing values may involve violence and threats to life? A unique group at the United Nations, the Values Caucus, is dedicated to the importance of seeking dialogue wherever possible. The Values Caucus searches for common values in a non-confrontational setting which emphasizes active listening to discover the values of others, a search for ways in which they can be shared, and ways to use these shared values for action towards peaceful cooperation in an interdependent and culturally diverse world. The Values Caucus is not officially a part of the UN, but functions within it.

Martha Gallahue, of the American Ethical Union's National Service Conference, has been active since 1998 in the Coordinating Council of the Values Caucus. In their Coffee Series, ambassadors meet NGOs in an informal setting, and are invited to speak from their personal sense of mission and ideals. The series, stretching back to 1997, has included talks by ambassadors from Chile, Mexico, Lesotho, Burundi, and Sudan. In the words of one ambassador, "I spoke the way I did because there was no microphone".

On 17 October, 2002, the invited speaker was the Iranian ambassador, H.E.M.R. Javad Zarif. "Debate is non-productive," he said. "Only dialogue can be useful. But in order to have dialogue, it must spring from a

culture which promotes it. What I do at the UN is debate. If I did not, I would be sent home."

Mr. Zarif emphasized that the legitimacy of governments depends on participation by their peoples. September 11 should have made dialogue more rather than less important. The possible war with Iraq would bring great suffering to the Iranian people and the region. Iran had already experienced the shock of chemical weapons from the war with Iraq, weapons which had been sold to them by the US.

It was clear that participation in decision-making and sharing of power were major issues in his thinking. His comments appeared to reflect not only the international situation, but that of his own government, in which a liberal parliament is struggling against the power of the fundamentalist mullahs. Terrorism, he remarked, was created by two groups, the demagogues who fomented it, and the people who responded to their calls. Material goals were not the only motivation for terrorists; non-participation, contributing to powerlessness and alienation, promoted an other-worldly view of life. Mr. Zarif's talk did not encourage any easy optimism, but the honesty and directness of his message only reinforced the desirability of dialogue at all levels. In a hybrid and contentious world, the Values Caucus is an ambitious undertaking.

## How the World Treats Its Children

A civilization should be judged by the way it treats its most vulnerable members. Will the world care for its children? In May 2002, world leaders gathered for a Special Session of the UN General Assembly on Children – a follow-up to the 1990 World Summit for Children, and an opportunity to review progress. On 20 November, 2002, the UN observed Universal Children's Day. Margaretha Jones, Co-Leader of the IHEU UN (NY) delegation, has participated in the Special Session on Children and the Working Group on the Rights of the Child at UNICEF.

So how are our children doing? Not as well as they should. Globally, 1 in 4 of the world's 2 billion children live in abject poverty in families with incomes lower than \$1 a day. Today, 1 in 12 children die before the age of five, mostly from preventable diseases such as malaria, measles and diarrhoea. Disease leads to poverty, and poverty deepens disease. It has been demonstrated that where health takes hold, women, knowing their children will survive, choose to have fewer children. Literacy, equality, the environment, and economic opportunity all improve. Health and the status of women are key ingredients for improving the condition of all people in the world.

Globally, the condition of children is morally unacceptable. However, all is not darkness. Some significant progress has been made in recent decades. Two minimum needs – safe drinking water and improved sanitation – are now available to nearly 1 billion more people. Some 2.5 billion children have been saved yearly by successful immunization programmes.

Polio has been almost totally eliminated. Many more children are attending school.

Granted that there have been real improvements, serious obstacles nevertheless remain. They include wars, AIDS, corruption and lack of democracy. For many years now, in spite of foreign aid, far more resources and money have been flowing out of developing countries into the economies of affluent countries. The amount has been estimated at \$186 billion in 2000 – a staggering sum, particularly when contrasted with the comparatively small amount of \$7 billion in addition to present funding needed to raise basic standards worldwide.

In spite of these difficulties, poor countries can make progress, given political will, good governance, and a deliberate decision to invest in their children. Malawi and Bangladesh, for example, have made great efforts to improve girls' education. A poor country can also provide reasonable overall living conditions for its people in terms of healthcare, education and life expectancy, as shown by Costa Rica and the Indian state of Kerala.

Admirable efforts have been made by NGOs and UN agencies with limited budgets. Progress could be cheap. The task is to make it happen. More can be done. After all, our children are the world's future.

*Sylvain and Phyllis Ehrenfeld are, respectively, IHEU's and AEU's National Service Conference NGO representatives to the UN at New York. The full UN reports can be found at [www.iheu.org](http://www.iheu.org).*

General Assembly notice

## IHEU-AHA Symposium and IHEU General Assembly 2003

Washington DC, USA, May 2003

### Dates

May 9, 10 and 11

American Humanist Association Annual Conference  
'Making Humanism Count'

Sun 11 May

IHEU-AHA International Symposium

'Humanism – Engaging the World – Confronting Injustice' (1.00 pm to 10.00 pm)

Mon 12 and Tue 13

IHEU General Assembly 2003

### Venue

Hyatt Regency in Crystal City, near Reagan National Airport  
Address: 2799 Jefferson Davis Highway, Arlington, Virginia 22202, USA  
<http://crystalcity.hyatt.com/property/>

### Registration

#### Conference and Symposium

- Registration to AHA Conference costs US\$95 and includes registration for the IHEU-AHA Symposium.
- Registration for the IHEU-AHA Symposium alone costs US\$30.
  - A gala dinner is planned for the evening of 11 May, and is not included in the registration fee.

#### General Assembly IHEU

- IHEU General Assembly is open only to Official Representatives of IHEU Member Organizations, IHEU Officers and Volunteer Representatives, and those specially invited by IHEU as observers.
- Paid-up IHEU Individual Supporters (Life, Annual and Club 100 Members) may attend the IHEU GA as observers, but need to register with IHEU Headquarters ([office@iheu.org](mailto:office@iheu.org)) by 10 April at the latest to receive all GA documentation.

### Accommodation

For Conference rates of US\$109/night at Hyatt Regency Hotel, book before 15 April.  
Hyatt Regency in Crystal City Telephone: 1800 233 1234

### Assistance

#### Conference and Symposium

For assistance with practical matters please contact the American Humanist Association:  
1777 T Street, NW, Washington, DC 20009-7125  
Phone: (202) 238-9088 Toll free: (800) 837-3792 Fax: (202) 238-9003  
Email: [aha@americanhumanist.org](mailto:aha@americanhumanist.org)

#### IHEU GA

For information about IHEU GA, please contact IHEU at [office@iheu.org](mailto:office@iheu.org)

### A Sad Farewell to Jean Kotkin

Jean Kotkin, who until 2001 headed the United Nations NGO delegation of IHEU as a volunteer, died on 4 January, 2003, at the age of 80. Through the strength of her personality and oration Jean presented the Humanist agenda effectively at this most crucial of venues, continuing to attend meetings diligently despite illness and inconveniences. Along with Margaretha Jones, she represented IHEU at the Intergovernmental Committee meeting which granted IHEU Specialist NGO status at the UN. Jean was associated with the American Ethical Union (AEU) and the Humanist Institute, and was a Board Member of the American Humanist Association (AHA). Her achievements and contributions to Humanism will be remembered with gratitude.

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*Bert Gasenbeek & Babu Gogineni [editors]*

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