

Leaving Hinduism

Penmetisa Subba Raju*

My Traditional Background

I come from a traditional Hindu family, but visits to the temple were rather rare and at home, performing *poojas* or religious prayers was limited to religious festival days. Even though I believed in God, I would not say that I had deep devotion.

At school I was taught *slokas* from the *Bhagavagita* which is the supposed discourse by Lord Krishna to Arjuna, explaining to him the duties of a warrior and that of all people. The Gita is where Lord Krishna preaches in a popular way that the world is unreal and that the Lord himself is real. I am not sure whether it is because of the Gita being taught to us, but I developed a strong belief in Lord Krishna and I firmly believed that he was the only, and true, God. I used to celebrate Krishna's birthday, *Krishnashtami* in a grand manner.

I am the youngest of five brothers. My second brother is an atheist, but strangely, he believed in souls and in ghosts! When his marriage was arranged with our maternal uncle's daughter, my brother insisted on a Registered Marriage instead of a religious ceremony because he said that the religious *slokas* that were chanted during the wedding ceremony were obscene. He proposed that there should be a simple exchange of garlands. This shocked my maternal uncles who were really opposed to this idea. As a result, the proposed alliance did not go ahead, the wedding was cancelled, and the prospective bride's side opted for another marriage alliance. Later, with my parents' consent, my brother opted for a Registered Marriage with another lady. My family atmosphere was broadly religious but also liberal, and these developments influenced my thinking and my outlook to some extent.

My Introduction to Non-Belief

Jinnuru, my village, had a library, which is quite a popular institution in West Godavari District. While I was pursuing my graduate studies, I chanced upon a monthly magazine called *Charvaka* there. Named after the ancient rationalists of India who probably lived around the time of the Buddha, published from Vijayawada and edited by Mr. Venkateswarlu, a committed rationalist and Humanist, this was a very popular Telugu rationalist magazine in the 70s, and it had a circulation of nearly 15 000. By the time I discovered *Charvaka*, I had already read many religious texts, and also some anti-religious texts like *Ramayana Rahasyalu* (The Secrets of the Ramayana). These readings prepared me to appreciate the essays in *Charvaka*. My friends and I would discuss the articles in the magazine with great interest, and we also read the essays exposing



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Satya Sai Baba's claims to miracles. The rationalist attitude began to develop in me rather slowly. At this point even though I was already developing an atheistic outlook, I was not bold enough to reveal my thoughts to others, as I felt that I did not have enough knowledge to convince them.

I then became a telephone operator in Eluru Post & Telegraph Company. Once on my way to the village, in Eluru bus station, I happened to see some books for sale: *Vishwanveshana* (In search of the Universe), *Hetuvadam* (Rationalism), *Nastikulunmaru Jagraththa* (Beware of Atheists) and I bought them with great

interest. The author of these books, Mr. Ravipudi Venkatadri, veteran radical Humanist, philosopher and writer, who was President of the Indian Rationalist Association, and later of the Rationalist Association of India, wrote with such style and clarity that I was instantly attracted to the thoughts, and reading the books gave clarity to my own thoughts.

Influenced by these books, and reading about other social reformers, helped me to broaden my mind to such an extent that I declared publicly my intention to get married to any divorcee through a Registered Marriage. This was my attempt to help improve the lot of single women who are not easily accepted in Indian society. But when my brother heard these thoughts, he opposed the ideas strongly so I settled for a traditional style conventional Hindu marriage. Being the youngest in the family and because of my family situation where we were not financially sound and my mother was bearing the burden of looking after all of us, I did not gather enough courage to think independently even a year after my marriage in 1980.

My Entry into the Rationalist Movement

Towards the end of 1979 I moved to Palakollu town. In 1983 I went with a friend to classes on rationalism conducted by the Rationalist Association of Andhra Pradesh (of which I am now President). We were greatly inspired by the speeches of Mr. Venigalla Subbarao criticizing the Hindu religion and obscenity in Hindu holy texts, and Mr. Jana Nageswara Rao, criticizing Christianity and the Bible. I had attempted to read the Bible in Telugu earlier, but gave up as I could not follow it. With help from Mr. Nageswara Rao, I studied it again.

When I organized training classes in 1985 in Vempa village, on the request of the then Rationalist Society State president Sri. Ravipudi Venkatadri, I spoke on the Bible and Christianity – for five hours. As this was my first speech, I said everything I wanted to say. Mr. M.V. Ramamurthy, an important Radical Humanist and

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Rationalist leader praised me but suggested that I should keep the allotted time in mind. After observing the way I studied the Bible, he also advised to me translate *The Bible Hand Book* written by F.W. Foot & G.W. Ball into Telugu. Because of his encouragement and suggestions, I translated the book; later, I wrote four more books on the Bible. This is what has brought me the ire of many Christian fundamentalists, not a few of whom, including their pastors, accosted me in the street and abused me.

Compared to the stranglehold of Christianity and Islam and of their religious leaders on members of their religions, Hinduism is more liberal most of the time. Perhaps caste has greater force than belief or non-belief in a deity. In any case, I did not face any criticism from either my family or my friends for the work I was doing or for the thoughts that I freely expressed. In 1998, when my mother died, we donated her eyes, and when we organized a remembrance meeting instead of a religious ceremony, all the family members except one attended.

When I established the Society for the Promotion of Eye Donation I received much support not just from the Rationalists and Humanists but also from many Hindus.

Muslims and the Christians do not come forward to have the corneas harvested after death.

I have been straightforward and fairly forthright in expressing my views, but the opposition to what I have been doing has been limited. Once, however, while I was addressing a public gathering, there was such immense opposition from religious persons that the police had to be called in and the meeting had to be abandoned. I still receive hate mail from Christians, for they know not what they write.

The atmosphere in India is slowly changing and Hindu intolerance is growing, as can be witnessed by the attacks on critics of Hinduism. I suppose that in the future Hindu fundamentalists may adopt the same tactics as Muslims to suppress criticism or to make it difficult to leave the religion.

My “conversion” to rationalism and Humanism did not happen instantly as a result of a negative experience in my life. My leaving Hinduism and adopting the rationalist attitude and the Humanist identity happened over a period of time based on reading and reflecting and learning from others. It is unlikely, therefore, that I will relapse into Hinduism.

My Journey to Sanity

Dr. M. Lee Deitz*

“Give me that Old Time Religion,” was my battle cry! Early in life, I listened to the old-time country preachers bellow out “hell fire and damnation”. As I matured, I convinced myself that I was to become a spokesman for the truth of “God’s Inspired Word”. Truth was defined by the community of which I was a part – the church, the elders, family and acquaintances. I dared not step out of the belief system.

My immersion in this subculture of religion was a choice that I made early in life. Hearing preachers expound biblical stories convinced me that the only way to God was to accept “the truth” to which I was being exposed and which I accepted as eternal reality. After high school, I chose to continue my studies at Bob Jones University¹ in Greenville, South Carolina.

Christian Fundamentalism is a strict belief in the literal interpretation of their Bible. The essence of Fundamentalism is to accept Biblical texts as inerrant. Believing the teachings of Jesus is more important than practicing those teachings. Though many of his teachings are impossible to achieve, this slight inconvenience is overlooked in view of the importance of accepting them as truth.

I was “born again” at the age of 11. “God called me to preach” at the age of 18. I graduated from Bob Jones University at the age of 22. I was “lost” again at age 45. My eternal salvation was only temporary!

In fundamentalist Christianity, the “born-again” experience is an all-encompassing encounter. The preacher instructs, Sunday school educates and the hymns

indoctrinate. The church was the center of activity and once I had “found God,” there was always someone to tell me what was right and what was wrong. Movies, hanging out at the beer joints, dancing, smoking, drinking, playing cards and an array of other activities were all forbidden.

My far-right religion brainwashed me with the notion that it was God’s anger that caused the assassination of John F. Kennedy. I firmly believed that God had removed him as an obstacle to a Christian nation. Martin Luther King was Satan personified. My psyche was geared to theocracy. I was so far to the right that I thought Bob Jones University was liberal. At the same time, I was having doubts about miracles, answers to prayer and the benefits of faith: somewhere in the past I had lost my faith and my brain was starting to catch up with reality. Denial, with continued belief, is destructive. It requires a giant leap of faith to accept unproven and impossible feats.

Some Christians who are otherwise prudent in their lives pretend to believe religious fantasies for fear of being excluded from family and friends. Giving lip-service to immanent babble, they rationalize the myths in order to be accepted and allow their children to be subjected to senseless and irrational silliness. It is indeed a mental disorder.

‘I have found religion to be oppressive, repressive, depressive, obsessive, and regressive’

I have now found religion to be oppressive, repressive, depressive, obsessive, and regressive. Once I was hooked, it was fear that drove me to the edge: fear of hell; fear of

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retribution; fear of punishment by disease or death of a family member. “If you love me, keep my commandments,” Jesus said (*John 14:15*), implies that if I broke one commandment, then I did not love Jesus nor would I have the rewards in heaven. That is fundamentalism!

While at Bob Jones, I was president of my class, chaplain of my literary society, and a prayer captain, and I won an annual sermon contest and was elected “man of the year.” I also preached on the street and directed music in a fundamentalist church.

After Bob Jones, I was an evangelist for a number of years with a radio program. I founded a statewide youth organization and wrote Sunday-school literature. I also worked as an assistant pastor and preached throughout the south-eastern United States.

My heroes were far-right preachers who pounded the pulpit with biblical dogma. I joined them with fiery sermons seasoned with brimstone from hell!

‘This great god of all power and knowledge, I discovered, simply did not exist except in the mind of man’

Working my way through an exit from the fundamentalist life, I found and experienced emotions that I never knew I had. Religion is a force of control and so takes possession of a willing mind that escape from it can be equated to a prison escape. For sure, there was anger: a feeling of betrayal: disappointment and complete emptiness. This great god of all power and knowledge, I discovered, simply did not exist except in the mind of man, and I realized that the concept was unproven, unknowable and unattainable, and amounted to simply another fairy tale. Through all the unintelligible pious nonsense, I considered the way religionists used the Bible for personal and political advantages. It was not about righteousness or morality, as they may claim, but about religious dominance and power. Notwithstanding the ambivalence of the leaders of the “Christian right”, it is equally preposterous that an otherwise discerning populace would be suckered by the ambiguity of a two-thousand-year-old tale. To keep my sanity, I was compelled to question the sacred, and this gave me the title of my book².

God was far away in nonexistence.

I wondered if Sunday morning might be the most irrelevant part of the entire week in a Christian environment. Think about it: what is the point?

- Sunday morning keeps religion alive.
- Sunday morning funds the most superstitious, mawkish and ambiguous ethos ever negotiated among purported intelligent life.
- Sunday morning is the one period in the week when so much wishful thinking is so collectively practiced with so little benefit.
- Sunday morning may just witness the most unintelligible state of momentary “brain dead”

ambivalence accorded otherwise rational people in the entire week!

A number of events led me to a real “born-again” experience – from religion to secular Humanism. The freedom is unequaled. No more wondering if I’ve done enough, if I’ve prayed enough, if I’ve given enough, if I’ve had enough faith and if Jesus is pleased with my life and if I would finally make it through those “pearly gates”.

Since childhood I was told what to believe. To doubt the inspired truths was a sin, (*Matthew 14:31*). We are all born atheist and then we are indoctrinated. The church is a master at brainwashing, manipulation and trickery. The early church made followers an offer which they could not refuse – an offer of eternal salvation at the acceptance of the savior. Shallow and childish dichotomies have infiltrated the entire system of Christianity. The antidote to this malady is thinking, reading and self esteem. The church – the house that guilt built – constantly tells us that we are “born in sin,” and depraved. That is fundamentalism!

My personal journey to sanity started after reading a single article in *Free Enquiry*. I have no recollection as to where I picked up a copy of the magazine. I often tell, as a joke, that “God sent it to me!” I was so captivated by the article that I remember reading several others and thought, “this is astounding.” A whole new world opened up to me. I joined the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship and that was a positive step in my journey to intellectual freedom. I became active with a small group of Humanists. I began to read and listen and, above all, I began to think.

Since my conversion from Christianity, I have accepted invitations to speak in numerous UU Churches and Humanist groups and have spoken at several national and international Humanist/Atheist conferences³. The freedom to think is a powerful liberation. While religion discourages thinking, open opinions and questioning, I have found the utopia of deliverance – a truly “born again experience.”

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I once stood in the pulpit and denounced the liberties of women! I once stood in the pulpit and deplored freedoms for black people! I once stood in the pulpit and attacked the idea of thinking! When I think of those I imprisoned in the house of guilt, I tremble.

Entrenched in fundamentalism as I was, I often wondered how to keep my sanity. In retrospect, I now realize that I had become a slave to superstition and the insane belief in an invisible friend. How absurd!

¹ Bob Jones University is a Christian fundamentalist institution.

² Deitz, M. Lee, *Questioning the Sacred*, 2000, available from: Book By MLD, PO Box 1744, Greenville, SC 29602. \$12.25 postage paid.

³ Dr Deitz is available as a humanist speaker for your group or conference. Hear, not hell-fire-and-damnation, but the “Humanities, Sanity and Reason” in an evangelical style. DrMLDPhd@aol.com.

Fighting for the Rights of the Non-Religious

Diana Brown*

The the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) annual meeting on democratic institutions and human rights, held in Warsaw in September 2007, started with sessions on tolerance and freedom of religion and belief. There were many contributors speaking on behalf of religious organisations, but the interests of the non-religious were represented only by the European Humanist Federation (EHF) and the British Humanist Association (BHA).

‘Religious groups, which already have privileged positions, and some of which vigorously suppress opposition when they are in positions of power, are now trying to cast themselves as victims.’

Strenuous efforts are now being made by religious leaders at the international level to attack secularism and to protect religions against so-called “defamation”. No satisfactory definition of “defamation of religion” has been advanced, but secularists fear that this is simply an attempt to limit the right to criticise religion and abuses carried out or justified in its name. Although the initiative for this attack on free speech originated with Muslim leaders and groups, who coined the term “Islamophobia”, the Roman Catholic Church and other churches in Europe have leapt enthusiastically onto the bandwagon with accusations of “Christianophobia”. Religious groups, which already have privileged positions, and some of which vigorously suppress opposition when they are in positions of power, are now trying to cast themselves as victims.

For example, the OSCE meeting heard the following contribution from Vatican representative, Monsignor Anthony R. Frontiero:

Demonizing Christianity, or deliberately mocking and undermining central tenets of the Christian faith as a means to promoting the rights of other groups is a clear and flagrant contradiction to the religious freedom and mutual respect that all people should enjoy, not to mention to the work of building a more just and peaceful community. Such practices must be seen for what they are: a subversive attempt to dismantle the progress made thus far in the promotion of tolerance and non-discrimination.

This resembles some of the comments we have seen in the wake of the Danish, and now Swedish, cartoons of Muhammad. Yes, they argue, of course free speech must be upheld, but it must not go so far as to offend the sensibilities of religious believers. If it does, it is an attack on the human right of freedom of religion! “Respect” must be automatically accorded to religious beliefs and believers.

‘freedom of religion has little meaning in countries that still maintain a law against blasphemy’

In fact, away from the rarefied atmosphere of international conferences, religious leaders are often anything but respectful towards other religions. (This is hardly surprising in view of their conflicting doctrines.) An extreme example is found in Saudi Arabia, where no religion other than Islam is allowed to be preached or practised. And freedom of religion has little meaning in countries that still maintain a law against blasphemy or even apostasy.

When it comes to atheists, agnostics and Humanists, almost no holds are barred. At the OSCE Conference, Vera Pegna of the EHF called attention to the fact that hate crimes were always preceded by hate language which, in turn, preceded and fed prejudice and stereotypes. The widespread use of hate language and stereotypes against Jews in Europe had justified centuries of persecution and made the Holocaust possible. A similar smear campaign against the non-religious had been going on for over 20 centuries and was still current.

In a submission on behalf of the BHA, Hanne Stinson also took up this theme, referring to the Catholic Catechism and to the rhetoric and death threats emanating from some Muslim groups, in particular against apostates. She also instanced the many well-respected and moderate religious leaders who regularly declared that there could be no morality without religion, or who linked secularism with Stalin, Hitler and Pol Pot.

‘If we wish to work on social cohesion and address exclusion, hatred and hate crime, we need to involve the whole community, not just the religious.’

Hanne pointed out that, in work of the OSCE and many countries on social cohesion and inclusion, the focus tended to be on faith, faith communities, and faith leaders (who were rarely truly representative of the people they claimed to represent), and on interfaith and multi-faith considerations. We certainly had a multicultural society, and a pluralist society, but our society did not only include a variety of different faiths, but also a large number of people with non-religious beliefs. If we wished to work on social cohesion and address exclusion, hatred and hate crime, we needed to involve the whole community, not just the religious.

David Pollock of the EHF made a similar point in his submission, which is reproduced as one of the succeeding articles.



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The War on Human Rights

News from the Battlefield

Roy W. Brown*

Human Rights at the United Nations has always been a battlefield, but with the creation of the new Human Rights Council in 2006, the enemy have consolidated their control of the high ground. Membership of the Council is heavily biased in favour of the Islamic States and their supporters. They make strange bedfellows. What is it that brings India into an alliance with Pakistan? And why would China and Cuba, archetypal atheist states, support theocracies like Iran and Saudi Arabia? The answer, sadly, is that by supporting one another in the Human Rights Council each can ensure that their own abuse of human rights, however blatant, will never be censured or condemned by the Council.

The battle is raging on many fronts. The Council was supposed to be a new start, wiping clean the tarnished history of the old Commission for Human Rights, starting afresh with new rules and procedures. But the rules of procedure have themselves become part of the battle. UN Special investigators, or "Special Rapporteurs", are now to be constrained by a code of conduct that will ensure that independent criticism of any state will more likely result in censure of the Special Rapporteur than of the state concerned. It is argued that the universal periodic reviews that will apply to every UN member state have eliminated the need for the investigation of individual complaints against states. It does not. And the last session of the Council in September adopted a resolution regarding the right to development. This may sound innocuous, but it was opposed by several Western states because lack of development was being held out by some states as an excuse for their failure to honour their commitments to human rights.

On 5 September the Netherlands Information Service announced that the EU would hand in to the

new session of the Human Rights Council a resolution that "emphasises the right to apostasy". To our surprise, when the draft text was published as a resolution on "The Elimination of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief" we found that while it mentioned "Islamophobia", "Christianophobia" and Anti-semitism, it made no mention of either non-believers or apostates. At an informal meeting to discuss the wording of the resolution I suggested that the resolution make specific reference to these two groups. The Egyptian, Pakistani and Russian delegates all objected – not to this idea, but to the principle that an NGO be permitted to propose changes to the wording. Any one of the 14 member states sponsoring the resolution could have picked up my suggestion, but none did. The final draft therefore made no reference to either apostates or non-believers. Yet surely the legal murder of apostates in some Islamic states is a far more grievous abuse of human rights than upsetting the sensibilities of Islamic extremists with a few cartoons. Despite this blatant example of pre-emptive cringe on the part of the European Union, the resolution still failed to attract sufficient support to bring it to the vote. Consideration has now been deferred until March 2008 at the earliest.

The Islamic states have been pressing for limitations to freedom of expression, particularly in the area of "defamation of religion" a concept they have chosen not to define. In the debate at the Human Rights Council on 13 September, I argued that, rightly understood, there is no conflict between religious freedom and freedom of expression. (See Box 1.)



1. Freedom of Religion and Freedom of Expression

Statement on behalf of IHEU to the UN Human Rights Council

We wish to comment on the somewhat fraught interrelationship between religious freedom and freedom of expression.

In her report to the Council the High Commissioner for Human Rights rightly states that "Freedom of expression and freedom of religion walk together".

Rightly understood, there is no conflict between freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief. All must be able to follow their consciences, express their beliefs and practise their religion, subject only to the constraint that in so doing they do not impede the right of others to do the same.

When dealing with issues that are this politically sensitive it is vital that terms are clearly defined. But

sadly, for example, none of the repeated resolutions on combating defamation of religions sponsored by the OIC and adopted by the old Commission, by the Council and recently by the UN General Assembly, define what is meant by "defamation of religion". This is a serious omission because we note with dismay that this lack of clarity is already being used in some quarters to stifle criticism of human rights abuse carried out in the name of religion.

A clear distinction must be drawn between, on the one hand, protecting the rights of believers, and on the other, attempting to protect ideas, beliefs and practices from legitimate criticism.

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Meanwhile, the Islamic states accused the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour, of failing to take seriously her obligations set out in the 2006 Council resolution “Combating Defamation of Religions”. Although what precisely she could have done other than report on the reality is difficult to understand. Perhaps in an attempt to appease the Islamic states (sorry High Commissioner, it can’t be done!) Louise Arbour then went on record as saying that bigotry and prejudice, especially in regard to Muslims, were common in Europe, and called on governments to tackle the issue¹. My immediate reaction to her statement – that she was “just plain wrong” – was widely reported. Her comment had been in response to a report by Doudou Diène, the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary forms of Racism, that Islamophobia, which he defines as “baseless fear or hostility towards Islam”, was on the rise, particularly in Europe. I was finally able to present a more considered response to this report on 25 September in a joint statement on behalf of IHEU and three other NGOs (See Box 2). Diana Brown also presented a statement on behalf of World Population Foundation on the chilling effect that religious doctrine was having in the field of reproductive health and rights (See Box 3).

The strategy adopted by the Islamic states at the Human Rights Council and elsewhere, aided and abetted by the likes of Doudou Diène, is to attempt to equate criticism of religion, particularly Islam, with racism. Fortunately the European Union is not, so far at least, prepared to go along with it, although their opposition to the idea can at best be described as muted. The Portuguese delegate, speaking on behalf of the EU did, however, say that they “could not see any direct connection” between disrespect for religion and racism.

There were, however, some particularly good statements from several non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The International League against Racism and Anti-Semitism directly challenged the report of Doudou Diène.

To read that report, the Western democracies are the home of anti-Muslim racism, mosques are burning in Europe, and women wearing the veil are regularly attacked.

The league holds this assessment to be false: “data from independent organisations in no way corroborates these assertions”.

The European Centre for Law and Justice argued:

Many supporters of the concept of defamation of religion have presented a conception [that] it is the religion and not the believer that merits the greatest attention and protection, and the standard of incitement becomes a purely subjective one, where the listener or object of the speech determines whether they are offended and whether incitement has



At the Palais des Nations, Geneva

occurred. This has even led at times to the dubious claim that speech has violated religious freedom, not because it has incited violence towards a targeted group, but because violence has resulted from the targeted group.

The NGOs may have won the argument but it will make little difference. The Human Rights Council has accepted that defamation of religion is a crime against human rights, and last December the UN General Assembly passed a similar resolution. The objective of these resolutions is to silence any criticism of human rights abuse justified by religious belief or practice.

Elsewhere the situation is not quite so bleak. As we reported in the last issue of *International Humanist News*, in June this year the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe passed two resolutions, one² calling on states to ensure that religious leaders take an unambiguous stand in favour of the precedence of human rights over any religious principle, and the other³ that blasphemy should not be a criminal offence. Attempts to give religions special status within the Council of Europe have (for the time being at least) been set aside following strong interventions by IHEU delegates at conferences in San Marino and St Petersburg.

At the Warsaw meeting of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in September, David Pollock, president of the European Humanist Federation, made a strong statement attacking religious privilege and in defence of free speech (see Page 28) and Hanne Stinson of the British Humanist Association called for non-believers to be included in inter-faith dialogue (see Page 24).

And last but not least, following meetings with several Humanist and secular leaders, Asma Jahangir, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, devoted a substantial part of her report to the UN General Assembly⁴ to the concerns of non-believers.

1 <http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSL1789786020070917?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>

2 <http://assembly.coe.int/Mainf.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta07/EREC1804.htm>

3 <http://assembly.coe.int/Mainf.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta07/EREC1805.htm>

4 <http://www.iheu.org/node/2809>

2. Islamophobia

Statement on behalf of IHEU to the UN Human Rights Council

The report on Islamophobia by Mr Doudou Diène, the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism is seriously flawed in three important respects.

First, he fails to distinguish between Islamophobia, which he defines as “baseless hostility and fear vis-à-vis Islam”, and concerns regarding the rise of Islamic extremism.

Secondly, he fails to recognise differences that exist between the Islamic and modern European worldviews. Rather than dismissing Europe’s defence of its values, he should recognise that these values are neither intangible nor exclusively “European”. They include the dignity and autonomy of the individual, equality of the sexes, democracy, and human rights – the very rights that this Council ought to defend. That these differences exist, and are far from intangible, is evidenced by the OIC’s promotion of the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam rather than the Universal Declaration.

Doudou Diène condemns as Islamophobic those whom he says portray Islamic values as “fundamentally opposed to those of Western civilisation”. Why does he

ignore the increasing number of Islamic leaders who present Islam in precisely this way? It is not “Islamophobia” to oppose such views.

Thirdly, and in common with the OIC and its repeated calls to “combat defamation of religion”, he fails to distinguish between opposition to Islamic extremism and hostility towards Muslims. Opposition to Islamic extremism is both necessary and legitimate. Hostility towards Muslims is neither. To imply they are the same thing is to obscure an important step in understanding the problem.

The small but regrettable level of hostility towards Islam did not arise in a vacuum, but largely as a reaction to Islamic extremism. More and more European mosques are promoting hard-line Islamic ideology, including the demonisation of Jews, infidels and homosexuals, and contempt for Western culture and civilisation.

It is regrettable that Doudou Diène failed to address the contribution of Islamic extremism to the rise of religious confrontation in Europe.

3. Defamation of Religion

Statement on behalf of World Population Foundation to the UN Human Rights Council

We are deeply concerned by the possible negative impact of the repeated resolutions here, and in the UN General Assembly, “Combating Defamation of Religions”.

In our work of promoting reproductive health and rights we often find ourselves being opposed by religious leaders. In our programs for sex education for young people in Africa it is more often than not the churches who oppose us, believing that ignorance in matters of human reproduction is better than knowledge. In Africa, many campaigns for AIDS prevention have been cut back or replaced entirely by religiously-inspired and totally ineffective campaigns promoting abstinence only – in a continent where abstinence is simply not an option for many young girls. And we actually find church leaders telling lies about the efficacy of condoms in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

In March this year we presented to the Council a paper on the cruel practice of child marriage. In some countries we are told that this blight on the lives of young girls has divine sanction, and that to criticise it is

tantamount to blasphemy – defamation of religion.

If States use the Council resolutions combating defamation of religions to justify legislation along similar lines, then there is clearly a grave danger that the effect will be to stifle opposition to religiously-sanctioned human rights abuse.

We would like to bring to the attention of the Council two recent recommendations by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, one of which¹ states unequivocally that human rights must take precedence over religious principles, and the second of which opposes any attempts to criminalise blasphemy² (or “defamation of religion”)

We believe that the Council resolutions combating defamation of religions are inappropriate and misguided. It is people that merit protection, not their beliefs.

It is the responsibility of this Council to defend the human rights of all, whoever may be opposed to them. It is surely not the responsibility of this Council to defend religions against the human rights of people.’

1 PACE Recommendation 1804 (2007) <http://assembly.coe.int/Mainf.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta07/EREC1804.htm>

2 PACE Recommendation 1805 (2007) <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta07/EREC1805.htm>

The Privileged Position of the Churches in Europe

Remarks for OSCE HDIM meeting Warsaw September 2007

David Pollock*

In 1989 in Vienna, OSCE member states agreed (in the words of their concluding document) to

(16.1) – take effective measures to prevent and eliminate discrimination against individuals or communities on the grounds of religion or belief in the recognition, exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms in all fields of civil, political, economic, social and cultural life, and to ensure the effective equality between believers and non-believers;

(16.2) – foster a climate of mutual tolerance and respect between believers of different communities as well as between believers and non-believers.

Today, 18 years later, that equality is still very far from established. People with non-religious beliefs, people who reject religion, are generally not seriously persecuted – Muslims who leave Islam may be an exception needing particular attention – but they are far too often ignored and excluded by Governments, while religion – especially the Christian churches – continues to enjoy huge privileges from the State.

Last year at this meeting I talked about the principles involved, and since then we have set out our vision of Europe's universal values for liberal democracy in the Brussels Declaration, which was launched on 27 February at the European Parliament All Party Group for Separation of Religion and Politics. That statement has won huge support from politicians, academics and other distinguished people across Europe¹.

This year, however, I want to give some examples of inequality between believers and non-believers. First, financial support through taxpayers' money from all citizens being given to the churches:

The Church of Denmark gets about 12 per cent of its income in grants directly from the Government. Norway also gives massive financial support to churches.

In France, Roman Catholic churches built before 1905 are owned and maintained by the Government at a cost of about 100 million a year, and priests are housed by local councils at a cost of about 50 million a year. In Greece, too, the Government pays for the maintenance of church buildings. The salaries and pensions of priests are paid by the Government in Greece, Luxembourg, Belgium, Hungary, the Czech Republic and elsewhere.

In Iceland everyone has to pay a church tax which is passed on to their own churches – but Humanists are not allowed to have it paid to the Humanist association: the state takes their tax.

In Italy about 7 per cent of income tax goes to the churches – the vast majority to the Roman Catholic Church

What this amounts to is a financial life support mechanism that sustains the power of the churches long

after their popular support has waned.

And it is not just money. Just a few examples:

In Britain, the Church of England – which has under one million worshippers in a population of 60 million – has 26 seats in the upper house of our Parliament, which it uses to block laws it does not like.

In Cyprus, marriage is governed by the churches.

In many countries some schools – sometimes the majority – are run by the churches, at Government expense: children at these schools are usually taught religion as a fact, not a disputed belief.

Even in state (non-church) schools religion is often a compulsory subject, and Governments often pay for clergy to give religious instruction. In Britain, religious worship is required by law even in non-church schools.

In many countries, the historical legacy of institutional power enjoyed by the churches ensures that laws on divorce, family planning, abortion, genetic research, euthanasia and so on are based on Christian doctrine and not on the will of the people.

Many countries have concordats with the Vatican that entrench the privileges of the Roman Catholic Church and make it impossible for Parliament or Government to modify or remove them.

What is more, in the European Union, churches have a highly privileged position. Not only do they have routine consultations with the Commission twice a year and regular seminars paid for by the EU, they also have a joint meeting with the Presidents of the Council, the Parliament and the Commission every six months at the start of each new Council Presidency. In a pretence of equality, the EHF has had two short meetings with the Commission in three years.

This is not the effective equality between believers and non-believers that OSCE called for in 1989. Rather, it is entrenched privilege for religion – especially Christianity. With church attendance in many countries down below 10 per cent, and with 25–50 per cent of European citizens rejecting belief in God, it is high time that Governments stopped this policy of religious privilege and discrimination against the non-religious that is such a blemish on our democracies.

Before finishing I must react to some things that have been said this morning.

The ODIHR reporter on Islamophobia referred (I think) to my own speech yesterday and said I had confused criticism of religion, which was legitimate, with defamation of religion, which should be forbidden.



*David Pollock is President of the European Humanist Federation

The speaker from the Observatory spoke about Christianophobia and said: “Religions should be protected from disrespectful portrayal of their beliefs”.

The representative of the Holy See said that mockery of religion was a “subversive attempt to undermine freedom and tolerance”.

These are all blatant attacks on freedom of speech. They are attempts to extend the human right of freedom of religion or belief, which belongs to individual human beings, to become freedom from criticism for religious beliefs and religious institutions.

The speaker on Islamophobia tried to draw a distinction between criticism and defamation. It is a

distinction without a difference – it is a matter of perception by the individual.

Mockery of religion may be in bad taste but it is an inalienable part of freedom of speech. Mockery may sometimes amount to incitement to hatred, but only in very limited circumstances.

Religion is generally hugely privileged in our communities. It is often worthy of respect – but human rights belong to individuals, not to institutions or religions, and attempts to extend human rights to religion itself and to religious institutions are a false and dangerous development that is to be resisted.

1 <https://www.iheu.org/v4e/>

Is the Fight Against Poverty Half-Way to its Target?

Report from the UN in New York

*Phyllis Ehrenfeld and Sylvain Ehrenfeld**

In 2000 leaders and representatives from 189 countries met in a UN Summit to respond to the problem, “the poor we have always with us”. Thanks to persistent ongoing pressure from Kofi Annan, then Secretary-General, they adopted target goals for the year 2015, the Millennium Development Goals.

The goals were modest, realistic, affordable and measurable: increasing primary education, alleviating extreme poverty and hunger, reducing maternal and child mortality and disease, and, very relevant to all of the above, improving the status of women.

These goals were morally admirable, yet well connected to self interest for the richer “haves” as well as the “have-not” nations. Such a world would be more secure against the ravages of disease, war, revolutions and the homelessness of dislocated populations. The Summit’s plan is radical in that it acknowledges that the world’s suffering is not an act of Nature but subject to human effort and particularly political will.

We are now halfway in time to the target date of 2015. How far have we come compared with the state of the world in 1990? The 2007 Report outlines the progress so far. Results are mixed. It is no surprise that many challenges remain. However, there is some good news. More children in developing countries are enrolled in primary school: an increase from 80 per cent in 1991 to 88 per cent in 2005. Child mortality worldwide has declined, in large part because of efficient and targeted interventions to save children from such threats as measles.

Worldwide, the number of people in developing countries in extreme poverty, living on less than \$1 a day, fell to about 1.0 billion, down from 1.25 billion in 1990. This reduction occurred mostly in China and

India. There was some progress in sub-Saharan Africa, but its extreme poverty rate is still over 40 per cent. There was little change in Latin America and the Caribbean. Some limited progress has been made in the very difficult problem of controlling malaria and tuberculosis. Although slow, some gains have been made in the struggle for equal rights for women through involvement in politics and government.

The bad news is that half a million girls and women worldwide still die annually of preventable and treatable complications in pregnancy and childbirth. There has been little progress in treating malnourished children. Worldwide AIDS deaths continue to rise. Half the population of the developing world has no access to basic sanitation.

There are a number of reasons for the slowness of progress. The principal cause is that economic growth is not equally shared both within countries and between countries. The share of the “haves” is always so much greater than the share of the “have-nots”. Between 1990 and 2004, the share of national consumption for the poorest people in the poorest countries actually dropped. Although the pie grew larger, their slice was smaller. This is particularly true in China, with a growing contrast between the rural areas and the coast, and India, with a growing gap between the North and the South.

Why are these gaps so extreme? There are several answers – an unfair trading system which benefits the developed countries and the West, the lack of local infrastructure to benefit from trade, governmental instability, armed conflict, bad governance, and the devastating effects of widespread illness, particularly HIV/AIDS and malaria. Poor people are also more affected by climate change.

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'The idea that human misery is ineradicable used to be an accepted truth.'

The idea that human misery is ineradicable used to be an accepted truth. A consortium of world leaders gathering to plan the major goals of the new millennium was an improvement and a beginning. To achieve the target is a major challenge. Yet success in some of the most unlikely countries shows that it can be done. As an example, Mali, an extremely poor country, is improving

and attracting foreign investment under an efficient President. He is emphasizing irrigation projects for agriculture to feed the population, and infrastructure to make trade possible. Clearly what is needed is both political will and good governance.

The help of the richer countries is vital. Without this help it will be impossible even for well-run governments to meet the goals. For the wellbeing of the world and for their own self interest, richer nations must honor their commitments made in the year 2000.

IHEU-Appignani Center for Bioethics: September 2004 to the Present

Ana Lita*

The IHEU-Appignani Center for Bioethics in New York was started in 2004 by a generous grant from the Louis J. Appignani Foundation. It is truly the first of its kind – a bioethics project dedicated to understanding contemporary bioethical challenges from an explicitly Humanist perspective. Integral to the Center's mission is stimulation of thoughtful, timely debate on these challenges, involving academics, medical professionals, governmental and international organizations, and many others. The Center works to bring interested parties together under Humanist principles, with the ultimate goal of informing and influencing the public – and policies – on matters of bioethical concern. In this manner, the Center acts, at times, as a counterweight to the myriad of religiously oriented organizations that function in similar roles.

The IHEU-Appignani Center for Bioethics is of interest not only because of its uniquely Humanist orientation, but also because IHEU holds special consultative status with the Social and Economic Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC). I have served as IHEU representative to ECOSOC and have attended regular briefings and events relevant to the Center's goals. We have also been busy organizing symposia and interfacing with other non-governmental organizations, country delegates, and diplomatic missions on the Center's behalf. Some of our activities are listed below.

Commission on the Status of Women (CWS)

The meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) occurs every March. The IHEU-Appignani Center for Bioethics, in collaboration with PCI-Media Impact and Femme Afrique Solidarité (FAS) organized a panel discussion on February 28, 2007 engaging bioethicists, physicians and activists to discuss "Health and Empowerment: The impact of HIV/AIDS Epidemic Worldwide and Female Genital Mutilation in African Diaspora Communities" at the United Nations under the auspices of the Division for the Advancement of Women, Commission on the Status of Women. I moderated the panel and presented a paper on Female Genital Mutilation in the African Diaspora Communities.

The discussion was open to public debate, with several UN news staff and media representatives attending.

Other NGO collaboration at the UN

In January, 2007, I was elected to the UN NGO Health Committee (CONGO). The purpose of the NGO Health Committee is to promote worldwide cooperation on health issues by providing a forum for the exchange of information on global health concerns, policies, services and research. The NGO Health Committee is a coordinating body of all health-related NGOs aimed at partnership-building. I have been a regular participant in the committee's monthly meetings since January, providing input and reflecting the interests of the Center.

Also since January 2007, I have been a member of the UN HIV/AIDS Committee. I participated in a United Nations panel discussion on HIV/AIDS entitled "Implementing the Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS: From Policy to Practice – Progress Achieved, Lessons Learned and Best Practices." It was part of a one-day Special Session of the General Assembly to review progress on combating HIV/AIDS.

Address at a UNESCO forum

I was invited to participate in an International conference called, "Bioethics Today and in the Mirror of Future Generations Conference" in Eilat, Israel, 11–14 February 2007, organized under the auspices of UNESCO. I presented a paper, co-authored with Jason P. Lott of the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, entitled "Professional Bioethics Committees, Women and the Future of Reproductive Biotechnologies."

Public debates and media outreach activities

Each year the Center provides a forum for informed



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deliberation across a broad range of issues, including, but not limited to, women's reproductive and sexual rights, stem cell research, organ transplantation, human egg markets, genetic engineering and neuroscience. Public debates have been promoted through conferences, panels, and symposia since the Center's inception in September 2004. In this respect, we have been successful in organizing a series of panels and annual conferences by engaging experts in bioethics, medical sciences, biosciences; NGO leaders; lawyers; policy-makers; Humanist activists; researchers and practitioners from around the world in an international and trans-cultural discussion.

National and European NGO collaboration

In the USA, partners for our lecture series and the annual conferences have included the Albany Medical School, the Institute of Ethics and Emerging Technologies, Genetics Policy Institute, PCI-Media Impact, and Femme Africa Solidarité (FAS).

At the international level, partners have included the Provinze International NGO based in Bremen Germany. In August 2007, I represented the Provinze Center and gave a presentation entitled, "Women's Rights in the International Political Community: Improving the Capacity for Bioethical Issue Analysis in the U.S. and Eastern Europe".

I have also collaborated with the UNESCO Chair in Bioethics – European Center for Bioethics and Quality of Life, Aosta Valley, Italy. After making initial contact with this European Center at the Israel conference I mentioned previously, it was decided that future collaborations between our Centers would be mutually beneficial. An American-European conference on the future of bioethics is planned to be held in Aosta in the Fall of 2008.

Publications

The Center also has also issued various publications, including a weekly column on bioethics in *Humanist Network News*¹, regular reports on bioethics in this magazine and on the IHEU website² and a blog hosted by Women Bioethics Project (WBP), the leading nonprofit, nonpartisan public policy think tank dedicated to women and ethical issues in health care and biotechnology³, and at Post-Genomics⁴.

Media coverage

I have represented the Center in various interviews as well as guest columns. The Center has also received ample popular press coverage in local newspapers, newsletters and the Internet. One of our forums was covered in *Science*.

Planned future activities at the UN for 2008

In February 2008 the Center will organize a panel discussion on behalf of the IHEU on organ trafficking and its impact on women's and girls' rights worldwide (see Page 39.)



Reception at the Romanian Consulate

The Center also plans to join several other NGOs in signing an official statement about trafficking of women and girls, for the CSW meeting. Our ECOSOC consultative status allows us to formally adopt and become signatories to such statements.

For the 2008 General Assembly of IHEU in Washington, the Center will organize and moderate a panel on "Humanism Bioethics and Biotechnology for the 21st Century" (see Page 38). Professor Jonathan Moreno of the Center for American Progress has already agreed to participate.

The Center will also continue to provide input to various UN NGOs on HIV/AIDS as well as the NGO Health Committee in preparation for various meetings that will be held at the UN this coming year. I will also be among the speakers at several of these meetings/conferences.

Working group on women's and girls' issues

To expand our project with Femme Africa Solidarité and PCI-Media Impact, we will be forming an NGO with these organizations to represent our interests at the UN and UNICEF on issues on such as HIV/AIDS as well as helping to establish a network of like-minded NGOs around the world, working on behalf of girls and women affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

We also intend to meet members of the delegations to CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women) to represent the interests of our Center.

Thanks to our donors

The Center continues its activities in New York thanks to the generous support of the Louis J. Appignani Foundation and its President, Mr Louis Appignani, along with that of Mr Larry Jones, President of Institute for Humanist Studies and First Vice-President of IHEU.

I invite all Humanists interested in bioethics to approach us with your thoughts and suggestions. The Center represents the voice of international Humanism, and that voice belongs to you!

1 <http://www.humaniststudies.org/>

2 <http://www.iheu.org/>

3 <http://womensbioethics.blogspot.com/>

4 http://www.medbioworld.com/postgenomics_blog

The United States and Humanism: A Battle on Two Fronts

Karen Frantz*

There was a buzz in the air as, over their banquet dinner, the audience watched the video on a screen in the front of the ballroom. No one in the room had seen anything quite like this before. Eyes sparkled and attention was sharply focused. Boisterous applause erupted at the opening of video, in which a suited man of resolute countenance, the American flag as his backdrop – addressed the audience.

“I’m Congressman Pete Stark, and I represent California’s 13th congressional district, located at San Francisco’s East Bay. And, as far as I know, I represent most of the non-theists around the world.”

It was the 66th Annual Conference of the American Humanist Association, held in June of this year in Portland, Oregon, and the audience was watching the welcome address delivered by the first-ever openly non-theistic member of Congress, Fortney “Pete” Stark. Not a minor event, considering that in the United States, for candidates running for public office, admitting you don’t believe in God can mean the proverbial kiss of death: fewer than 50 per cent of people said they would vote for an atheist for president, even if that candidate was well-qualified and from their own political party.



Rep. Pete Stark

“I’m not particularly interested...in whether religion is a force for good or bad,” Stark continued. “I’m more interested in having religion not be a force for any governmental policy at all...Unfortunately, many people are working overtime to have our Government impose their particular religious beliefs on others. They want to forbid civil unions between gay couples. They want to encourage – indeed, in some cases require – prayer in public schools and in the military. And they want to allow Government-funded social service organizations to discriminate in their hiring policies. None of this should be happening.”

But it is happening – and it’s been happening for a long time.

Rep. Stark’s speech at the American Humanist Association conference highlights the struggle Humanists face in America today: to keep religion out of government so that individuals can live their lives without having someone else’s personal and subjective beliefs foisted upon them. Thomas Jefferson’s wall between church and state is vital if we are to protect the right for Humanists to live their lives as they please – without God.

Of course, this struggle not only benefits Humanists and other non-theists, but people of all religious beliefs as well. Most Humanists would agree that, though they aren’t religious themselves, religion can be a source of great personal solace and strength for many people. And the best way – indeed the only way – to protect the right of the people to their religion is to keep politics far away from it: just as the state can flourish when it’s unadulterated by religion, so does religion flourish when unadulterated by the state.

However, what we’re seeing in America today are two increasingly vocal and polarizing crowds – one that wishes to push their religion on others through infiltration into government and society, and another that sees all manifestations of religion as a threat and wishes to do away with it all together.

The first camp represents a “third awakening” of sorts that has taken place across America: a renewed religious devotion that is likely an effect of the fear of terrorism that has gripped society in the States. Increasingly we hear from the Rush Limbaughs, James Dobsons, and various other pundits on Fox News about the “War on Christians,” and a call to reclaim America as a Christian nation. Intelligent Design, the claim that certain features of the universe can best be explained by an intelligent cause (or, in other words, theology in sheep’s clothing), is being pushed as an equal alternative to evolution in science classes in our public schools. Pharmacists are arguing that they have the right to refuse to sell women Plan B, the morning-after emergency contraceptive pill, because use of the pill violates their religious belief. All pointing to the overwhelming sense that religious needs are currently taking priority over secular needs in American society today.

Of course, it doesn’t help that the second camp – a small group of vocal writers and pundits – actually have launched a war (if in name only) on Christians, and for that matter, religion in general. Sam Harris, author of *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Daniel Dennett, author of *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*, and most recently Christopher Hitchens, author of *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, are all members of this “New Atheism,” as it’s been dubbed by the press. Particularly in Harris’s and Hitchens’s case, this new brand of atheism is particularly hostile to religion, arguing that religion is unnecessary and dangerous and should be done away with entirely.

This polarized battle between two fronts – one religious, one non-theist – obscures the real battle that we should all be fighting. What neither side seems to realize is that both of their interests are served by a rigid separation of church and state: it guarantees one side the right to practice their religion as they see fit and the

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other side to be protected against religion's intrusion into their lives. And it's important for this message to click soon: religion has managed to lock a stranglehold on the political debate, and wields a tremendous amount of clout in Washington today. From the Executive to the Legislative Branch, policy initiatives and projects are being funneled through the system that erodes the separation of church and state.

For example, Bush's pet project, the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, was created to purportedly "level the playing field" when it came to the awarding of grants to social service organizations, but in fact ended up giving preference to Christian – especially Christian Evangelical – groups. Congress has been no better – writing bills that would allow military chaplains to proselytize unwilling soldiers, that would make it harder for legal groups to challenge the government when it violates the ban on the government establishment of religion, and that would

bar the courts from reviewing First Amendment cases that pertain to the words 'Under God' in the Pledge of Allegiance. Nor is the Supreme Court exempt from this list, most notably deciding in the recent case *Hein v. Freedom From Religion Foundation* that taxpayers had no standing to sue the Executive Branch when it violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

This intrusion of religion into government harms us all – non-religious and religious alike. Thus, for Humanists' sake – indeed, for everyone's sake – it's important that we heed Rep. Pete Stark's advice and continue to fight for church-state separation. Humanism's cause isn't to eradicate religion, but we understand that there is a time and a place for religion and we should not tolerate its intrusion into government. Rather, in order to spread compassion, foster reason, and advance science, we continue our Humanist struggle to keep religion and government separate to benefit us all.

Unconstitutional Institutions in Canada

Doug Thomas*

An American Humanist once asked me what it is like to live as a Humanist in Canada. He looked wistful as I said that the experience is usually positive and that people's reaction to learning that I am an Agnostic Humanist is usually polite, although sometimes surprised. Yes, there are altercations between Canadian Humanists and believers and, in at least one case recently, such an altercation turned violent. However, for the most part, we just go along without any ruffles in our lives.

But, and a sizable but at that, this may be simply a result of our lack of energy in defending our rights. Every day, non-believers in this country are confronted with persistent institutions that are contrary to the spirit and letter of our Charter of Rights and Freedoms and do nothing about it.

That Charter came into effect in 1982 as a part of the Constitution Act of the same year. Both of them were passed by our Parliament as part of the process of patriating the British North America Act, the British law that, in 1867, created Canada as we know it. The Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees:

- a) freedom of conscience and religion;
- b) freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication.

After 1982, the Supreme Court of Canada expressed the opinion that these clauses defend the right to freedom **from** religion as well as the right to freedom **of** religion.

While this right may be legally in place, few Canadians seem aware of it. Our public institutions continue to exhibit theist qualities. Many of our government institutions and even fundamental government structures are full of religious influences, left over from our history, but continued as a matter of course in our daily lives.

Our head of state, the Queen of Canada, is also the head of the Church of England (and the Queen of England among other countries). How does this provide any separation of Church and State? Her likeness is stamped on every Canadian coin and is surrounded by the (albeit arcane Latin) words "Elizabeth II D [ei] G [ratia] Regina." No, folks, our coins are not minted in Regina, Saskatchewan, but in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The phrase means – hold onto your happy humans – "Elizabeth II, Queen by the Grace of God."

Now, I know that most of us do not stare in disgust at our coins as we hand them over in our ubiquitous Tim Horton's coffee shops, nor do we attempt to file off the offending words (an illegal practice, by the way, dating from the time that coins were made of precious metals). However, each coin is a little testament to the latent theism in our Government circles.

As harmless and quaint as this connection between our head of state and a church may seem, it should not be overlooked. The separation of church and state must go all the way to the top. Prince Charles has suggested that if he becomes king, he will renounce his position as head of the Church of England. This would certainly solve the problem and I should think that if he does not do that, we should not accept him as the King of Canada. I have begun to think we should take steps to begin electing our Governor General (the representative of the reigning monarch) in preparation for such a republican possibility.

We happen to have one of the most elegant and "singable" national anthems on the planet, "O Canada."



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It can survive almost any kind of instrumentation and still bring us to our feet in celebration. I still cherish the envious looks on the faces of the latest American women's Olympic hockey team when the Canadians in the crowd at the gold medal ceremony sang the words loud enough to compete with the music. At the same time I shuddered at the words, "God keep our land glorious and free." If they had sung the French version my shuddering could have been even worse. Literally translated it is replete with phrases such as, "Your arm knows how to wield the sword and how to carry the cross," and "your valour is imbued with faith."

I have had a connection with our national anthem for some time. When I was in university, movie theatres played "God Save the Queen" before each movie. Upset with the theist content of that anthem, I allied with other rebellious Canadian nationalist students to begin a protest that eventually led to the theatres changing to "O Canada". The theist words that became our official national anthem were still in the future – a product of a devout, Roman Catholic Prime Minister named Pierre Elliot Trudeau.

Every morning, public schools in Ontario open the day by playing "O Canada" and by observing a moment of silent meditation. We have succeeded in having prayers removed from this official ceremony. Playing "O Canada" presents no problem when an instrumental version is played, but is offensive to non-believers when a vocal version with the official, but theist, words included is played. Delegations to local school boards will soon request that instrumental versions only be played until the federal government corrects the words of the official anthem. A perfectly good non-theist version exists in English and I know some people are working on a francophone version.

Just as we refused to stand for the British national anthem as part of our movie-going ritual, we should exercise our rights to remove the theism from our national anthem. Ultimately, unless a sudden wave of sense sweeps through the House of Commons, we will likely have to have the law that makes our national anthem official declared *ultra vires* by the Supreme Court.

The theism of the Canadian House of Commons can get very serious. Just ask former New Democratic Party MP, Svinn Robinson. He was a member of the committee that worked on the wording of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms – until he had the gall to suggest that the preamble that says, "Whereas Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law." was too theist and contradicted the spirit and the letter of the document. Once he said that, he was unceremoniously dumped from the committee and his political demise almost certainly started then.

'We Canadian non-believers are accepted until we actually stand up for our rights'

You see, we Canadian non-believers are accepted until we actually stand up for our rights. A few years ago, I actually had a Lutheran minister tell me that Agnostics were far too outspoken. He was unable to quote anyone specifically at the time, which leads me to think that any vocalization from us Agnostics was too much. We are tolerated as long as we stand quietly while religion is

foisted upon us, but quickly become targets if we object.

In other circumstances, we are expected just to join in with the only option available or not participate at all. November 11 presents a dilemma for some of us. Either we can stay away from Remembrance Day ceremonies and forget about officially remembering the wartime sacrifices of our fellow Canadians, or we can participate publicly in a theist ceremony. Many of us are beginning to hold our noses and participate. Should we not propose another ceremony that is specifically for non-believers? I wonder what official reaction to that would be?

The situation is more critical with the attitude of the Conservative government of Stephen Harper. Recently, any criticism of Conservative policies, which include favouring theism, has resulted in accusations of being un-Canadian. This is overlaid on the general attitude of Parliament that Canada is and should remain a Christian state. There is a prayer room on Parliament Hill and a New Democratic Party MP recently proposed a "faith caucus" in Ottawa.

In Ontario, we had to speak out against the designation of a room as a "prayer room" at Queen's Park. The idea was put forward by New Democratic Party MLA, Cheri Di Novo, and received at least nominal support from the Speaker of the Legislature and the Liberal Premier, Dalton McGuinty. When confronted by non-believers, Di Novo claimed that the room would provide a space for all faiths to practise prayer and meditation and a space for Atheists to "chill out". I think the variations of diplomacy surrounding the room would be very interesting. What would a Christian MLA do if he found the room occupied by a non-believer already there "chilling out". By the way, do any of our officiants have a copy of the order of service for "chilling out" that I could borrow?

I recently had to invoke the shadow of the Ontario Human Rights Commission to get an invocation removed from the commencement of the high school at which I teach after the administration essentially stonewalled my request to have it removed. Once I pointed out in writing that I had the Supreme Court's interpretation of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms on my side and that the Ontario Human Rights Commission agreed, the invocation was quickly and quietly dropped.

A large part of our problem, of course, is that none of these things is life-threatening nor do any cause any loss of income or apparent loss of human dignity. Invisible minorities receive far less attention than visible ones in Canada. As a result, gaining the support of our fellow non-believers proves difficult. Membership in Humanist organizations is very low. With approximately 3.2 million non-believers in Canada (based on a 10-per-cent estimate from the census of 2001), the registered members in Humanist or similar organizations number but a few thousand. I sometimes envy the pressures felt by American non-believers who feel more sharply the need to join up.

In addition, changing these things will take a long time. This will probably be a matter of commitment for more than one generation of Humanists. However, if we stand up reasonably and firmly, we can change the default position that religious practices are the norm. If we are to really live freely as Canadian Humanists, we have a great deal of work to do.

It's Hard to Imagine No Religion in America, But We Try!

Annie Laurie Gaylor*

Here in the United States we live in a country that was the first to be founded on secular principles. Many of us also live in fear that we will become the first such country to vote out those secular principles! We have been treated, with our 2008 presidential election looming, to a parade of pious politicians wearing religion on their sleeves, competing among themselves to see who can pander most successfully to the religious voter. A secular national news network televised a "faith and values" forum last June in which Democratic candidates such as Hillary Clinton were asked and expected to seriously answer such questions as, "What do you pray for?" and "What is the biggest sin you ever committed?" A leading Republican candidate, John McCain, recently said point blank that "the Constitution established the United States of America as a Christian nation," even though our Constitution does not mention God, Jesus or the Ten Commandments. Several Republican candidates have even publicly endorsed creationism!

It would be hard to imagine a candidate today echoing what Catholic candidate John F. Kennedy said in 1960:

I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute; where no Catholic prelate would tell the President – should he be Catholic – how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote; where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference, . . .

Thomas Jefferson's metaphorical "wall of separation between church and state" is being battered, broken down and tunneled under. The Pope has not only told Catholic politicians how they should vote (against abortion, gay rights and stem-cell research), but our Methodist President actually begged John Paul II to call on the U.S. bishops to support him in his re-election bid! "Patriot pastors" are mustering their congregations. The nation's largest Protestant church, the Southern Baptists, recently announced their open plans to "make the will of Christ supreme in public affairs," and to turn the 16-million member church into "a disciplined political machine." Since President Bush announced his "faith-based initiative," billions of dollars of public funds have poured into churches and religious organizations with literally no oversight, monitoring or accountability. Perhaps most disturbing is the fact that the U.S. Supreme Court now has a 5-4 majority which is Roman Catholic, and these justices are voting together as a right-wing block. "Separation between church and state" isn't what it used to be in the United States!

In the past week, the Freedom From Religion Foundation has gone to a federal court to stop a public school district in Colorado from recommending that children spend at least one hour a week at a "religious institution." Among the state/church complaints I handled this week was writing to a school superintendent in Ohio to ask him to stop a social studies teacher from forcing children to memorize the Ten Commandments!

Among the recent newspaper exposés was an article in the *Washington Post* revealing that President Bush has encouraged federal workers to accumulate "religious compensation time." One worker received an extra \$18 000 upon retirement for the time he would have spent in synagogue, but spent at work instead!



Many Americans look at recent events, and realize that if we do not speak up now to make known our opposition to attempts to turn the clock back to a Disenlightenment, we are in danger of losing our civil liberties. A turning point was the 2005 Terri Schiavo case in Florida. Few of us will forget the spectacle of Congress meeting in the middle of the night, and Bush helicoptering in from his ranch, to interfere with a court decision to permit a vegetative woman to die after 15 years in limbo. The histrionics were calculated solely to appease the religious right and play political football with this tragedy. Michael Schiavo fought the power of the Catholic Church and Congress, and followed his wife's express wish not to be kept alive indefinitely with heroic measures. His actions were vindicated, and Congress was shamed, when the autopsy revealed Terri had indeed been in a persistent vegetative state. We all asked ourselves: if Congress could stick its nose in one family's case in this disgraceful manner, what else might it be prepared to do, and whose rights might be the next theo-political sacrifice?

Paradoxically, the excellent news is that there have never been more atheists, agnostics, skeptics and other freethinkers openly making known their dissent from religion in the United States. The nation's definitive survey of "religious identification" found in 2001 that the self-defined "non-religious" make up 14 per cent of adult Americans – that's 30 million of us! The non-theistic runaway bestsellers by Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett and Sam Harris have focused media attention on free thought. Free thought groups are flourishing. Although our First Amendment's separation of church and state has never been under greater attack, there has never been greater free speech for freethinkers. We at the Freedom From Religion Foundation now have a national weekly free thought program on Air America Radio, which opens to the strains of John Lennon's "Imagine." We have started to erect our own billboards – employing a stained-glass window motif bearing the words "Beware of Dogma" and "Imagine no religion," to counter the ubiquity of roadside religion. The pendulum seems finally to be swinging back to reason in a religion-drenched nation. We have our work cut out for us, but we take comfort in the example of a largely secular European Union.

*Annie Laurie Gaylor is Co-President of the Freedom From Religion Foundation

Secularism, Civil Rights and Public Neutrality

The Turin Colloquium, 16 June 2007

Margaret Nelson*

Turin was the first capital of a unified Italy and has a long history of secularism, so it was an appropriate venue for a gathering of Humanists from the European Humanist Federation (EHF) and the International Humanist and Ethical Union on 16 June 2007. They, and the European Humanist Professionals, seized the opportunity to pool information and experiences, discovering differences and common concerns during the day.

It was encouraging to have messages of support and greeting from regional, provincial and city bodies, including the President of the Province of Turin, **Antonio Saitta**.

Chairman **Giorgio Vilella**, National Secretary of the Italian Union of Atheists, Agnostics & Rationalists (UAAR) opened the morning session by commenting that Pope's interference in state politics was driving up membership of the UAAR, so it appeared that he had his uses. Other sessions were chaired by **Robbi Robson** of the IHEU, **Cesare Pianciola**, President of Comitato Torinese per la Laicità della Scuola, and **Jacqueline Herremans**, Vice-President of Centre d'Action Laïque, Belgium.

In his opening remarks, **David Pollock**, President of the EHF, said there were communication problems between European Humanist organisations, not because of language differences but because of different interpretations of words like "secularism". He also referred to changes in the religious nature of Europe; "Europe was once a Christian continent. It barely is so any longer. Some countries have a majority of unbelievers." He ended by saying:

...in a secular, open society, unbelievers – call them Humanists or call them what you will – are given equality with believers, as promised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights and all other such instruments. A secular society is the guarantor of freedom of religion or belief – or unbelief. Anything else means privilege for one group (or a few) and discrimination against all the rest. We need to challenge loudly and insistently all those who oppose secularism to recognise that they are defending unfair discrimination and unfair privilege.

In her opening remarks, **Sonja Eggerickx**, IHEU President, spoke about the shared values of Humanists, atheists and secularists, and asked if it was possible to say that life stances should not be mixed with public life.

Tullio Monti, President of Consulta Torinese per la Laicità delle Istituzioni, spoke about the Italian situation:

Humanists in Italy were fighting hard. Italy's political representation failed to reflect the extent of its secularisation because of the Catholic Church's considerable influence, obstructing modernisation.



Attentive listeners

The Vatican's interference in state affairs and its parasitic presence in all areas of public life were evident in many ways, as Tullio Monti detailed. Italian women were denied equality and self-determination; Italy's gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people suffer discrimination; Italian divorce and adoption laws were antediluvian; medical advances like therapeutic cloning were resisted.

The Catholic Church's attitude towards sex and reproduction were well known. Its attempts to assign legal status to the human embryo had to be resisted. Its motives were entirely theological. It opposed contraception and the use of the RU486 pill. The Church's position on sex education and the use of condoms had led the deaths of millions by famine and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. This was no less than "genocide". Signor Monti also listed the Church's efforts to prevent the provision of sterilisation for men and women, the right of the dying to a living will and legal euthanasia, a solution to the problem of sex trafficking, a review of prostitutes' rights to safety and healthcare, and a review of Italy's obsolete drug laws.

On Italian education, Monti quoted the Constitution, which stated that private schools should not be funded by the state. Scandalously, the Church had enrolled 24 000 religious teachers, chosen by bishops and paid by the state. He deplored the spread of anti-evolution Creationism in schools, imported from the USA.

The Church had rejected the principles of the Italian 1929 Concordat between State and Church, and its 1984 revision. Monti called for a guarantee of religious freedom and an end to the state subsidy of the Church. This, and eliminating direct or indirect public financial support, including tax exemptions, could significantly reduce the Italian national debt.

With regard to "multiculturalism", he preferred the concept of "interculture", and spoke about the acceptability or otherwise of religious symbolism in

*Margaret Nelson is a Humanist activist from Suffolk, UK.

public, and of “community” rituals. Rites of various sorts were important even in a secular culture.

He ended:

We can see how such matters are heterogeneous as well as strongly connected to one another by a common ethos, which allows us to display the essential soul of an open and secular society, free and tolerant, respectful of the rights and freedom of each and every one of her citizens. This is the kind of society for which we fight a difficult, but strongly motivated, cultural and political fight, hoping one day to see it accomplished.

Dr Georges Liénard, EHF General Secretary, reported on Humanist activity in The Working Group for Separation of Religion and Politics (WGSRP) in the European Parliament. In European Union politics, there was a real opportunity to promote secularism:

After having signed a concordat with the Holy See, Slovakia had been willing to sign an additional treaty based, for the first time in the long history of concordats, on the Right to Exercise the Objection of Conscience. The Holy See was willing to restrict this right to those referring to “the teaching of faiths and morals of the Catholic Church”. The group sought official advice from the European Parliament legal service and from a network of independent experts on fundamental rights. Its report pointed out the potential for conflict with health service staff on issues such as euthanasia, contraception, artificial fertilisation and, especially, abortion.¹ (See also the EHF website for a short commentary by David Pollock²). Slovakian ministers resigned and the Slovak government decided not to promote this part of the concordat.

Questions to the European Parliament had been prepared on a variety of subjects; one was the famous article 52 of the draft treaty mandating a dialogue between the European Union and religious and non-confessional organisations. President Barroso was asked to receive a delegation from the EHF, as he had received religious delegations, and this happened on 5 July, 2007.

In November 2006, David Pollock, as EHF President, was invited by the Chair of the WGSRP to deliver a talk presenting Humanism and the EHF’s views in favour of a secular Europe.

A second round on secularism was organised at the end of February this year with the presentation in the Parliament of The Brussels Declaration³, presented by Roy Brown and sponsored by IHEU, EHF, and Catholics for a Free Choice.

Marco Rizzo, an Italian Member of the European Parliament, spoke about the European Union:

Individual rights were important to Europeans, but the Italian situation was anomalous because of the presence of the Vatican (as had already been illustrated by Tullio Monti). For many Europeans, money was the present-day God. Tax evasion was a huge problem in Italy, together with racism and economic migration.



A convivial evening

Europe had a culture of secular rights and worldwide this ideology was flourishing, but in Italy the relationship between church and state was unfair and unequal. For example: church marriages were acknowledged by the state, but civil marriages were not recognised by the Vatican; the Italian Ministry of Education had allowed any baccalaureate student who followed a Catholic course to be automatically awarded three credits – this ruling had been revoked, but no one had yet told the schools.

The afternoon session included contributions from **Claude Singer**, from Libre Pensée, France, and **Rob Buitenweg**, IHEU & EHF Vice-President from the Netherlands, on the “Pillar” system⁴.

In Italy, the state had been dominated by the Church for centuries and secularists were fighting to shake off its power and control. In Britain, a Government led by a pious Prime Minister (Tony Blair) had invited unelected religious leaders to have *more* influence over matters of state. **Hanne Stinson**, Chief Executive of the British Humanist Association, spoke about the challenge of “multiculturalism” in the United Kingdom:

Multiculturalism was defined in several ways. If it was about allowing people to live according to their own beliefs and culture, without disadvantaging others, few Humanists would object, but it could also be defined as identifying people by one or two characteristics – their race or, more typically, their religion – and then grouping everyone who shared these characteristics as a “community”. If one treated such “communities” as homogeneous and allowed appointed (including self-appointed) “community” or “faith” leaders to speak for them, it encouraged segregation and oppression. This definition of multiculturalism was currently Government policy in the UK. It was also government policy to increase the number of single-faith publicly-funded schools, which were allowed to discriminate on grounds of religion in admission and employment policies. A pro-faith policy increased the Government’s reluctance to tackle issues like forced marriage and so-called “honour killings”, or to resist religious demands to restrict free speech. It contracted out public services to the private and voluntary sectors, and was particularly keen to do this with faith-based organisations, which were exempt from anti-discrimination legislation.

Largely through the BHA’s campaigns and government lobbying, there was growing recognition of some of these issues, including growing public opposition to state-funded faith schools, but there was a long way to go.

During discussions, **Keith Porteous Wood** of the National Secular Society in the UK commented that more religious politicians, and even non-religious politicians, were reticent about the importance of freedom *from* religion, as well as freedom *of* religion, in the human rights context. **Senator Magda Negri** of Italy felt that too many politicians served their own interests, rather than those of the state; she said there was a need for “a new

Enlightenment". **Matt Cherry**, Executive Director of the Institute for Humanist Studies, based in the USA, said that United Nations standards protected the non-religious equally with the religious, and that everyone should refer to these standards in fighting for the rights of the non-religious.

The colloquium was closed by **Carlo Augusto Viano**, and at the end of a very full day, delegates from the EHF and the IHEU and the organisers (Consulta Torinese a per la Laicità della Istituzioni) enjoyed a convivial evening together.

1 http://ec.europa.eu/justice_home/cfr_cdf/doc/summaryop4-2005.pdf

2 <http://www.humanism.be/in/doc/pdfs/Opinion%204-2005%20-%20D%20-%20Pollock%20-%20Web.pdf>

3 https://www.iheu.org/v4e/html/the_declaration.html

4 The 1992 Maastricht Treaty divided European Union policies into three areas, or "pillars"; European Communities, Common Foreign & Security Policy, and Police & Judicial Co-operation in Criminal Matters. The new European Constitutional Treaty scrapped the three pillars, proposing to bring all the work under the ambit of the European Commission.

IHEU 17th World Humanist Congress 2008

E Pluribus Unum: Reclaiming Humanist Values

6-8 June 2008, Washington DC, USA

Held jointly with the Annual Conference of the AHA

The 2008 IHEU General Assembly will be held either side of the Congress on 5 June and the afternoon of 8 June. The American Humanist Association will hold a board meeting on the afternoon of 4 June and there will be a range of other activities including an IHEYO Conference.

The World Congress will be held at the **L'Enfant Plaza Hotel, Washington D.C.**

Further information from <http://www.americanhumanist.org/conference/index.php>, or contact AHA's office (see below).

Registration

Regular Registration is \$249 per person and includes access to all the breakout and plenary sessions throughout the conference, including Saturday's luncheon, reception, and dinner.

Student Registration is \$40 per person and includes access to all breakout and plenary sessions, Friday dinner at a nearby restaurant, and an intimate Saturday dinner with Lori Lipman Brown, director of the Secular Coalition for America. Students must have a current student ID. (Students not paying for a banquet meal will still be able to attend the awards program.)

The Humanist of the Year Banquet, to be held at 8 pm on 6 June, is **optional** and costs an **additional \$60**.

The easiest way to register is via the Conference website (see above), but you could also register by telephone. From USA or Canada, call toll free at **1-800-837-3792**. From elsewhere, call **+1-202-238-9088**. Please call during regular business hours (Monday-Friday, 9am-5pm EST).

To register by post, please supply the following details:

1. State whether you want regular or student registration. (*For student registration, please send a photocopy of your student ID.*)
2. Name of Humanist organisation(s) to which you belong, if any (*this information is optional*)
3. First name
4. Family name
5. Name you want to have shown on your badge
6. Whether you want to attend Humanist of the Year Banquet
7. Any special requirements, such as vegan or vegetarian diets or information on allergies or disabilities.

and send them with your cheque or money order to: World Humanist Congress, American Humanist Association, 1777 T Street NW, Washington DC 20009-7125

Hotel booking

To book a room at the special rate of \$129, the easiest way is to follow the instructions from the Conference website. Alternatively you can contact the hotel directly at 480 L'Enfant Plaza, SW, Washington, D.C. 20024, telephone: (+1) 202-484-1000, or via their website: www.lenfantplazahotel.com. Mention the "IHEU Congress" and group code AHA603.



*The IHEU-Appignani Center for Bioethics invites you
to a Panel Discussion in New York*

Organ Transplantation and Organ Trafficking, New Challenges and Controversies

**Tuesday, December 11, 5.30- 7.30 p.m.
at 777 UN Plaza, 2nd Floor, on 44th St. and 1st Ave.**

under the auspices of the Council of Europe and the United Nations
Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and the Advancement of
Women

Panel members will include:

Art Caplan, Ph.D, Emanuel & Robert Hart Professor of Bioethics, Chair,
Department of Medical Ethics and Director, Center for Bioethics,
University of Pennsylvania

Rachel Mayanja, J.D., UN Assistant Secretary-General, Special Adviser
on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women, Department of
Economics and Social Affairs

Ana Lita, Ph.D (Panel moderator) Director IHEU-Appignani Center for
Bioethics

The panel will discuss the ethical, social and legal implications of organ
transplantation and trafficking as well as its impact on women's and
children's rights.

*Organ trafficking is on the rise, fuelled by growing demand and unscrupulous
traffickers. While waiting lists for organs become longer in rich countries, selling
one's organ may be an irresistible temptation to the poor. Increasing demand has
greatly intensified organ trafficking, and the challenges of transplantation are
pushing ethical concerns about trafficking and its victims, including women and
children, to the top of the international agenda.*

*Speakers will explore ethical issues surrounding the shortage of organs for
transplantation and black-market organ trafficking, and will consider technical
problems, such as possible immune rejection and preserving organs outside the body.*

A closing cocktail reception will take place at the Consulate General of
Romania between 8.00-10.00 p.m. Thanks are due to the Romanian
Consul General for offering this delightful venue.

For more details please see: www.humanistbioethics.or. If you would like
to attend, please email analita@iheu.org or call Ana Lita on 001 212 687
3324

Visit the IHEU website

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Rep. Pete Stark of the US Congress