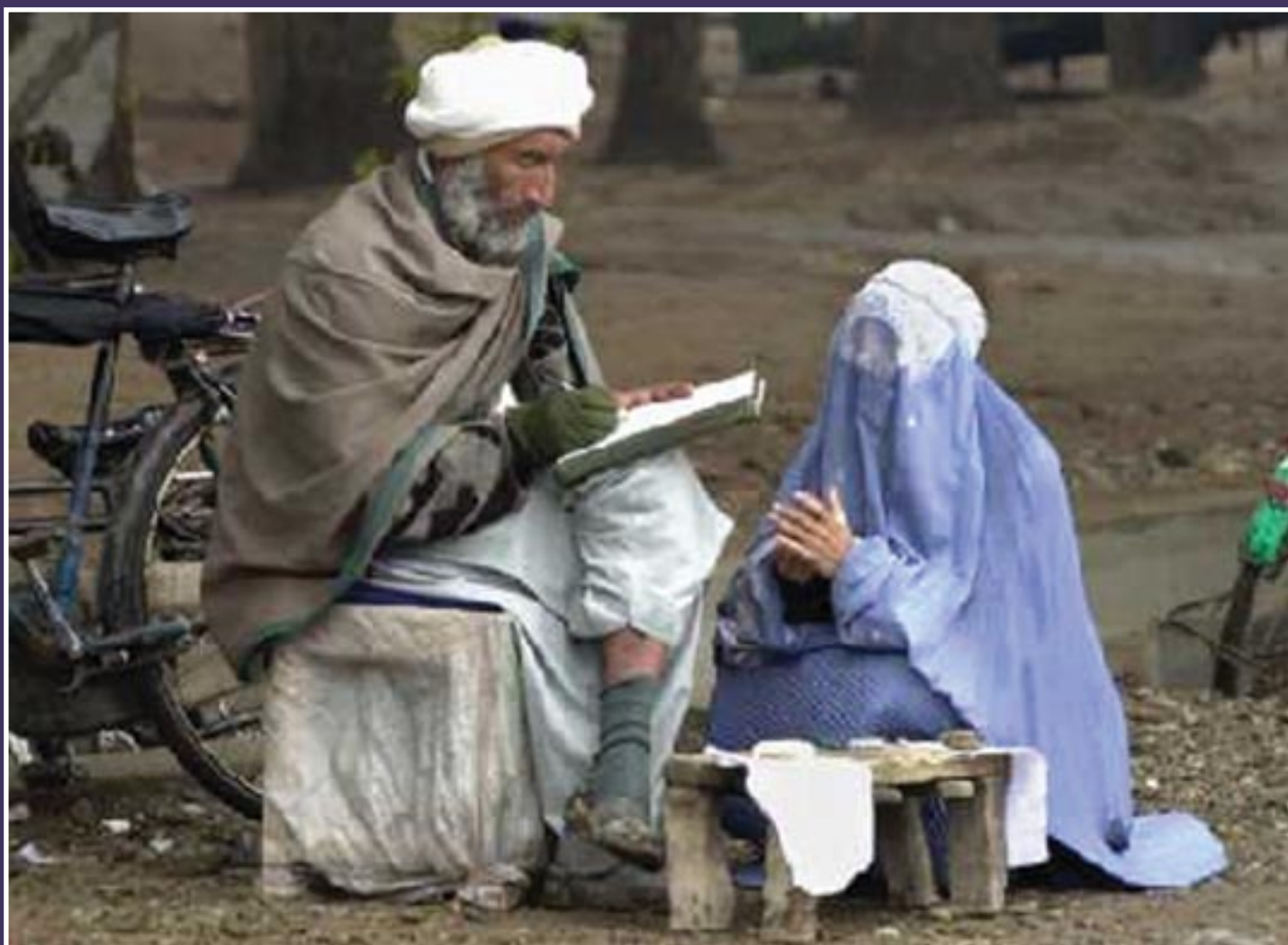




INTERNATIONAL HUMANIST NEWS

International Humanist and Ethical Union

August 2003
£5



Life Under the Sharia: Islamic Law and Human Rights

INTERNATIONAL HUMANIST NEWS



August 2003

IN THIS ISSUE

News	3
From the President <i>Roy Brown</i>	4
IHEU General Assembly <i>Babu Gogineni</i>	5
AHA Annual Conference <i>Roy Speckhardt</i>	7
IHEU and the Council of Europe <i>Alexandre Marius dees de Sterio</i>	8
The Gods of War <i>Mustafa Kamal Pasha</i>	9
Defending Human Rights in Islamic Countries	10
Coming of Age – the Non-Religious Way <i>Gea Meijers, Gregor Ziese-Henatsch</i>	16
Student Humanism in the United States <i>Stephanie Kirmer</i>	17
Fighting for Women's Rights in Iraq <i>Houzan Mahmoud</i>	18
Islamization in Bangladesh <i>Fatemolla</i>	19
Enlightened Developments in Canada <i>Sheila Ayala</i>	20
Progress for Irish Humanists in Marriage Reform <i>Dick Spicer</i>	20
Slovakia: the Trojan Horse in the Future Unified Europe? <i>Alexander Rehak and Miloslav Ambrus</i>	21
UN Reports <i>Sylvain and Phyllis Ehrenfeld</i>	22
News in Brief	23

Cover: An Afghan woman receives instruction (likely to be limited to the Koran) at the roadside. Photo: Rawa. We wish to thank the brave unknown photographers who have captured this and other images used in this issue.

ISSN: 0929-4589

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

IHEU Headquarters & Editorial Office
1 Gower Street
London WC1E 6HD, UK
Tel: 00 44 20 7631 3170
Fax: 00 44 20 7631 3171

President: Roy Brown
Email: roy_w_brown@hotmail.com
Executive Director: Babu Gogineni
Email: babu@iheu.org
Editor: Latha Menon
Email: editor@iheu.org

Website: www.iheu.org

Printed by Rap Spiderweb Ltd, Clock Street,
Hollinwood, Oldham, Lancs OL9 7LY.
Tel: 0161 947 3700

From the Executive Director

Strict separation of religion and state alone provides the institutional guarantees for protection of the freedom of conscience. Yet, this separation is being steadily eroded in many parts of the world with disastrous consequences. In countries as diverse as Bangladesh (see page 19), Slovakia (see page 21) and India, be it Islam, Christianity or Hinduism, religious doctrine in politicized form rather than human rights and values is influencing state policy. As a result, the most fundamental of our liberties – freedom of thought, liberty of expression, equality before the law, reproductive choice, access to unbiased education – are all under serious threat (see *From the President*, page 4). IHEU's General Assembly meeting in May in Washington, DC (see page 5) decided therefore to focus on defending and promoting separation of religion and state as a priority in IHEU's five-year strategic plan.

In many Islamic societies where the all-pervading Sharia law criminalizes the most basic of human activities and urges and metes out cruel, barbaric punishments, the very concept of separation of religion and state is considered a strange notion (see page 10). Lasting change or improvement can never be imposed – it has to come from within the community. So a recent campaign to uphold human rights in Islamic countries, launched by enlightened members of the Muslim community, will receive IHEU's and its member organizations' full support.

Summer is here in the northern hemisphere: many in the Humanist world marked International Humanist Day (the summer solstice, 21 June) with celebratory lunches, exhibitions and conferences. I had the pleasure of attending the first World Humanist Day Congress organized by the Dutch Humanist Alliance in Utrecht where the focus was on World Citizenship, War and Peace. There is a groundswell of support for IHEU from the Dutch Humanist organizations, which would like to help Humanism play an important role at the UN and other international institutions.

A strong organization, increased help to smaller Humanist groups through fundraising, and greater effectiveness at the international institutions are all part of our new president's vision for IHEU. Roy Brown, who took over the IHEU presidency from Levi Fragell at the General Assembly, said in his acceptance speech, "In the coming years IHEU will work to achieve a higher profile in the media, with governments, and in public awareness on issues of separation of religion and state, in support of the victims of persecution, and to defend and promote the principles of Humanism." I hope that together we can all ensure that this vision translates into reality.

Babu Gogineni

INVITATION FOR ARTICLES

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

Contacting IHEU

General:

IHEU Office (*supporters, donations, change of address, etc.*)

International Humanist News (*articles, letters to the editor*)

IHEU Campaigns

IHEYO

IHEU Funding Programme

humanism@iheu.org

office@iheu.org

editor@iheu.org

campaign@iheu.org

youth@iheu.org

funding@iheu.org

News

IHEU Executive Committee Update

Following elections at the IHEU General Assembly in Washington DC in May, Roy Brown has been elected President of IHEU for a term of three years. Robbi Robson and Rob Buitenweg have been elected Vice Presidents for three-year terms each. Robbi Robson is also First Vice President.

The new IHEU EC is: Roy Brown

(Switzerland, President), Robbi Robson (UK, First Vice President), Larry Jones (US, Vice President), Sonja Eggerickx (Belgium, Vice President), Rob Buitenweg (Netherlands, Vice President) John Leeson (UK, protem Treasurer) and Babu Gogineni (India, ex officio).

Retiring President Levi Fragell has agreed to be Chair of IHEU's Growth and Development Committee.

IHEU Welcomes New Member Organizations

IHEU's GA this year welcomed *The Humanist Society* as a Specialist Member Organization. Formerly known as the Humanist Society of Friends, the group was founded in 1939 when a group of Quakers, influenced by the first Humanist Manifesto, decided to part ways with the Quaker movement and set itself up in California as a religious, educational and charitable non-profit organization. Based today in Washington, DC, the Humanist Society offers Humanist counselling and also certifies Humanist celebrants. Website <http://www.hsof.org/>

The 15-year old *Hyderabad Rationalist Forum*, which joined the IHEU as an Associate Member Organization, was established to spread rationalist, humanist and atheist ideas, to encourage intercultural marriages and to curb

superstitious practices in the twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad, Andhra Pradesh, India. The Forum works through monthly lectures, and publishes an English language bimonthly *Rationalist Voice*. It is affiliated to the Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations (FIRA) and the Federation of Rationalist, Atheist and Humanist Organizations of Andhra Pradesh (FARA).

IHEU is also pleased to welcome the Dutch Humanistisch Vormings Onderwijs (HVO), Utrecht, which has reactivated its status as a Specialist Member Organization of IHEU. HVO specializes in creating Humanist educational resources and training and will play an important role in education-related activities, networking and coordination amongst IHEU member organizations.

Humanist Celebrations in the Netherlands

International Humanist Day

The first World Humanist Day Congress in the Netherlands was organized on 21 June by the Humanist Alliance of the Netherlands, in cooperation with the Dutch Humanist Peace Council, and IHEU Specialist Member Organization HIVOS. Held in the elegant Ottone Hall in Utrecht, the theme *World Citizens between War and Peace* gave an interesting opportunity for the assembled 150 Humanists to discuss Humanist visions of cosmopolitanism, issues related to violence and peace, the social role of Humanist movements, and creation of an agenda for international Humanism. The Congress opened with a plenary discussion between Ineke van der Well, Chair of the Humanist Alliance, Rob Buitenweg, Vice President of IHEU and Babu Gogineni, Executive Director of IHEU,

on the significance of a World Humanist Day. After the plenary the participants took part in a range of workshops considering the challenges for Humanists and advocating concrete proposals for improving human rights globally.

Thonesdag

The Humanist Archives, which is a Specialist Member Organization of IHEU and also keeper of IHEU Archives (based at the University of Humanistics in Utrecht) celebrated its 5th anniversary on 6 June 2003. The day was termed 'Thones Day' commemorating Piet Thones, a former Co-Chair of IHEU and the inspiration behind the Humanist Archives. The half-day celebrations on the theme Humanist Heritage included a surprise unveiling of *The Encyclopaedia of Humanism*, a major project that will be undertaken by the Archives.

Introducing Our New President

Roy Brown is a (semi) retired British businessman who has lived in Switzerland for the past 16 years. He has been a long-time active Humanist and advocate of family planning, abortion rights, voluntary euthanasia, and human rights generally.

In 1987 while living in the Netherlands he founded, with his wife Diana, the World Population Foundation, a Dutch non-governmental organization working to raise awareness of the human, social and environmental problems connected with rapid population growth. WPF is now the leading European NGO in the field of population and reproductive rights and health. Roy served as chairman of WPF for 10 years.

Roy is a life member of the British Humanist Association but it was only in January 1999, after attending the 14th IHEU World Congress in Mumbai, he tells us, that he realized that Humanism was central to all the social issues that he really cared about. He joined the IHEU Committee for Growth and Development in May 2000 and became its chairman later the same year. He was elected a Vice-President of IHEU at the General Assembly meeting in Oslo in May 2001 and has now been elected President. He brings to the office over 30 years experience in both business and in the management of humanitarian organizations.

Roy believes that Humanism must be more than a passive philosophy of life. As President he aims to persuade our member organizations, particularly those in the west, to engage with their fellow Humanists in developing countries and to help them in their struggles against poverty, oppression, ignorance and disease.

From the President

Fifty years ago, the founding fathers of IHEU could look back on two centuries of almost uninterrupted progress in the secularization of western society. And they looked forward with confidence to a world in which religion would have lost its power over the hearts and minds of ordinary people; a world ruled by the twin Humanist virtues of rationalism and compassion. How shocked they would be today by the resurgence, not only of religious belief, but of religion as a political force. Almost everywhere, secularism and Humanism are in retreat. In the United States, in Russia, in India and in the Islamic world, the marriage of politics and religion is again being celebrated, and is again devastating the lives of millions. Faced with the increasing violence inspired by religious certainty, it would be easy to despair. But we should not, for this marriage is nothing new.

Two thousand years ago the Roman orator, Seneca, commenting on religions in general, said "The common people find them all equally true, the philosophers find them all equally false, and the magistrates [read 'politicians'] find them all equally useful". There never was a time – no long lost golden age – when kings and princes, tyrants and dictators, even duly elected political leaders, did not seek to benefit from the support of the priests. Yet despite the evident synergy of politics and religion, humanity has achieved enormous progress in the past 2,000 years, progress that surely seems irreversible. Certainly, we have entered a period in our history when the pendulum seems to be swinging strongly in the wrong direction. In Iran, people we had thought too bright, too wise, too modern in outlook to be fooled, were plunged back into medieval horror. In America, with George W. Bush as president, the Christian right have had a willing tool ready to implement their deeply regressive social policies – a tragedy not just for the United States but for many of the world's poorest nations. The fall of communism gave new hope to the oppressed millions of the former Soviet Union, hope that was swiftly dashed by the reality of gangsterism and the new-found influence of the Russian Orthodox Church. In much of the Islamic world the 'benign Islam of our grandfathers' has been overwhelmed by the ugly face of political Islam and of jihad. Reports emerge daily of the public hangings and stonings of victims of Sharia law while, even in the west, critics of this pernicious system live in fear for their lives. In India we see Hindu fundamentalists gaining political popularity on the back of inter-communal violence in which thousands of Muslims have been killed – violence condoned, and even in some cases abetted, by Government officials.

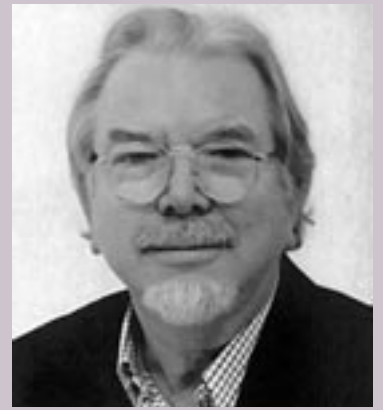
Why in this age of unprecedented scientific, technological and material progress does religion still retain so much of its power? There are of course many possible answers to this question, but two stand out. First, people will believe what they want to believe. It is

far easier to believe than to think, and many hope desperately for something beyond this earthly life; for heavenly compensation for their pain and suffering here on earth. What they actually believe is of course determined more by the religion of their parents, and by where they live, than by any cool consideration of the relative merits of their chosen faith. Secondly, both priests and politicians invest heavily in maintaining their power and influence. But we should not despair. However shrill the clarion calls to patriotism and faith, the pendulum will swing again, because in the end those messages are sterile. In the end, it is the message of Humanism: of human dignity and autonomy, of equality between the sexes, of freedom of thought and of free inquiry – the message of the Enlightenment – that will be heard.

In 2000, IHEU General Assembly concluded that separation of religion and state was the greatest challenge facing world Humanism and that campaigning for the separation of religion and state would be central to our strategy. We have now organized meetings, conferences and seminars in France, India, Slovakia, the US, the UK, Nigeria and Norway on this issue. We have long campaigned against references to religion or a deity in national constitutions and have recently been supporting the campaign to keep God out of the European Constitution. We also endorsed the 'See Change' campaign aimed at stripping the Holy See of its privileged status at the UN. IHEU will continue to support our member organizations in their struggles to combat the encroachment of religion on public policy and on the rights of non-believers, and we will work with other organizations and NGOs on international campaigns against deeply conservative religiously inspired policies.

I am an optimist. There is increasing awareness among politicians and religious leaders alike that if we are ever to escape from the vortex of violence and retribution that has characterized much of human history secularism is the only possible way forward. Rationalism and Humanism will probably never replace religious belief; human nature will see to that. So we must work for a society which permits every shade of personal belief while favouring none, which enables everyone to worship or not as they wish, but without the right to impose their religious beliefs on anyone else; a world in which every nation will have established a level playing field for believers and non-believers alike. I ask every Rationalist and Humanist to join us in this endeavour.

Roy Brown



IHEU General Assembly, Washington, DC

A new-style General Assembly, aimed at ensuring greater participation from delegates through the introduction of thematic sessions as well as a keynote address from the Executive Director (see page 6) was held in Washington, DC. Participants and observers included representatives from Belgium, France, Netherlands, Canada, Bangladesh, Iraq, Israel, India, Uganda, Norway, US, Switzerland, and the UK. A special guest at the GA was Lloyd Morain, 87, a founder director of IHEU.

The GA considered and endorsed IHEU's 5-year strategic plan 2003–2007 presented by the EC which listed amongst the long-term aims of IHEU the promotion of 'the identity of Humanism including the name and symbol of Humanism', the building of 'a strong and effective global organization', the strengthening of 'organized Humanism in every part of the world' and the promotion of 'Humanism as a non-theistic life stance throughout the world'. The GA also gave support to IHEU's present activities of organizing international congresses, supporting Humanist groups in developing countries, participating in international and regional bodies to further Humanist goals, carrying out of human rights campaigns, and maintaining communication through publications, the website, and e-news. In line with its endorsement, the GA welcomed a presentation requesting IHEU's support for a campaign

to defend human rights in Islamic countries.

An important theme at the General Assembly was fundraising for IHEU. A charitable trust called the International Humanist Trust has been set up by IHEU in the UK, and IHEU now also has 501(c)(3) tax exemption status in the US. At the GA, IHEU Vice President Larry Jones pointed out that 70% of every dollar raised in the US goes to religious organizations – a staggering \$150 billion a year. There is a strong case for IHEU raising money: it is time now to build the capacity of the organization, and to create a healthy endowment fund. The GA offered unanimous support to IHEU's fundraising efforts and made several suggestions as regards fundraising initiatives.

In addition to international representation for Humanism and youth Humanism, another important theme was growth and development of international Humanism. IHEU now has both thematic and regional representatives, and partnership and twinning arrangements are to be promoted between IHEU member organizations. IHEU is also looking to develop the international Humanist movement in Africa: IHEU's 2004 General Assembly will be held in May in Kampala, Uganda.

Babu Gogineni

Extracts from IHEU's Annual Report for 2002

2002 – A Year of Celebration

Reflecting IHEU's stature as the world's only umbrella organization embracing humanist, atheist, rationalist, secularist, skeptic, *laïque*, ethical culture, freethought and similar organizations worldwide, IHEU's grand 50th anniversary celebrations included a World Humanist Congress in the Netherlands (*All Different, All Equal* with participation of the Dutch prime minister) which brought together 350 Humanists from 34 countries, an International Youth Conference (*Empowering Youth within the Humanist Movement*) with 45 participants from 16 countries, a 50th anniversary General Assembly with an unprecedented participation of nearly 100 Humanists from 34 countries, the publication of a Jubilee Book (*IHEU, Its Past, Present and Future*), creation of an online World Humanist Congress, revamping of the organization's website, and the issuing of the *2002 Amsterdam Declaration on Humanism*.

Campaigning: At the Front Lines

The worldwide campaign by IHEU and its member organizations to save Dr. Younis Shaikh, convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to death in Pakistan, is well known. IHEU added its international Humanist voice to those in Nigeria calling for the release of young women condemned to death for 'immorality' – significantly, it was in Nigeria that IHEU launched the campaign against fatwas, at a time when this most populous African nation was beleaguered by religious rioting and fatwas

calling for death to journalists. IHEU also defended the right of Humanist Shahriar Kabir in Bangladesh, unfairly arrested on charges of sedition for supporting minority rights. IHEU participated in the picket outside the Indian High Commission in London against the genocidal killings of 2000 Muslims in India, and offered support to the artist Dorota Nieznalska, being prosecuted by the Polish authorities on charges of blasphemy.

New Vistas and the Challenges Ahead

In several parts of the world religious fundamentalism is on the rise, intolerance is raising its ugly head, superstition is making a comeback and debilitating poverty persists. The modern world still suffers from ancient tyrannies: political, economic, cultural, and religious. For Humanism to be a way of life for everyone everywhere, Humanists need to use, as IHEU's Amsterdam Declaration 2002 states, 'free inquiry, the power of science and creative imagination for the furtherance of peace and in the service of compassion'. That remains IHEU's mission and purpose.

IHEU's Annual Report for 2002 was presented to the GA by outgoing President Levi Fragell on behalf of the EC. A full version covering IHEU's Growth and Development, conferences in France and Greece, international networking, youth activities, IHEU's work at UN, UNICEF, UNESCO and the Council of Europe is available. Requests must be emailed to office@iheu.org

Rights of Man or Rites of Religion?

IHEU's Executive Director Babu Gogineni made a wide-ranging speech at the GA covering questions of universal values, globalization, militarization, and the challenges to the modern Humanist movement. Extracts are printed below.

We need to move towards a post-religious Humanism. We need renewal. We need rejuvenation. We should identify the most pressing problems of the world – and, as groups of concerned individuals, we should apply Humanism's liberating principles to the solution of these problems or to set the direction for change.

Today's Humanism combats the despotism of religion on the mind, proposes alternative rituals, and advocates care services to match those performed by religious groups. Valuable work. But why target religion alone? Why not the despotism of the market? In today's world Humanism is threatened by more than just extreme religion – if the global society that is to be formed has to be formed on universal principles, then we need to demonstrate that our values are not just an elevated particularism, but that they have a universal significance and are applicable to all aspects of life. Are Humanists to play politics? I suggest they should. Not by playing power politics that as someone said is the strife of interests disguised as a conflict of principles, but by playing the politics of freedom – the promotion of democratic principles, and the defence of human rights. What is Humanism, if it is not about human rights?

Organized Humanism

A Humanist group should be open only for Humanists because we have shared objectives to pursue and common goals to attain. The organizational mode undoubtedly has its own hazards: frequently we are caught up in organizational identities. Our identity I believe should be as human beings, first and last; an identity we realize best through Humanism. We are children of reason, and, like Thomas Paine, we let passion fill our sails, but reason is our rudder. Since we look at our tradition as a human tradition that exists within and without our groups, we should be able to build alliances with people, even outside our groups, to achieve our common purposes.

Our Utopia

Our Humanism should not be a Humanism defeated 'by the pessimism of thought, but fired by the optimism of the will'. We should recreate the world according to our conception of the human being. And to succeed in that grand cultural task we need to re-engage with our grand tradition.

The goal is freedom. Freedom is also a path and as we traverse it we achieve it, as Prof. G.D. Parikh put it. The means of Humanism have to be consistent with the goals of Humanism. Are all these Utopian ideas? Maybe so! But then the one freedom denied in Thomas More's *Utopia* was the freedom to be an atheist, and the freedom to deny the immortality of the human. Even in a Utopia, there is no rest for Humanists!

Lloyd and Mary Morain: Pioneer World Humanist Ambassadors

IHEU's General Assembly was pleased to have Lloyd Morain as an honoured guest this year: Lloyd and his wife Mary Morain were founder directors of IHEU in 1952. Fellows of the World Academy of Art and Science, the Morains served the cause of Humanism throughout their lives: in 1954 Lloyd and Mary wrote the popular book *Humanism as the Next Step*. They were involved in many public causes: Lloyd served on the Board of the Planned Parenthood Association, and in the 1940s and '50s Mary was on the birth-control boards in both Massachusetts and California as well as becoming President of the International Society for General Semantics. Sadly, Mary died in 1999 – but at 87, Lloyd is well and maintains a keen interest in IHEU's development and welfare.

Both Levi Fragell and I were amazed to receive from Lloyd documents relating to work he and Mary had done for IHEU to help establish links with Humanists around the world, and especially to promote Humanism in Africa in the 1950s. Browsing through the Morain papers, one learns of their trip to Nigeria, Uganda and Kenya, of an active Rationalist group in Ghana in 1958, and of

Humanist-oriented development work in Botswana. In 1954, the American Humanist Association's then Executive Director Edwin H. Wilson entered into

correspondence with Samuel P. Etu of Nigeria. With support and encouragement from the AHA's Committee on World Humanism – which seems to have operated IHEU's World Humanist Extension Project – Samuel Etu established the Nigerian Humanist Association.

Apart from supporting the Nigerian Humanists through their personal generosity, the Morains also encouraged Hector Hawton of the Rationalist Press Association and officials of the British Ethical Union (now the British Humanist Association) to help the remarkable Tai Solarin, who established the Mayflower School in Nigeria (see *IHN*, February 2003). Several hundred books were sent to the school through this appeal. These early and dedicated efforts by IHEU's founders to take Humanism to countries where it is desperately needed make inspiring reading.



Lloyd Morain

Babu Gogineni

AHA Annual Conference in Washington, DC

by Roy Speckhart

This year's annual conference of the American Humanist Association was held back to back with IHEU General Assembly, and the two events were bridged by a joint AHA/IHEU symposium, *Humanism: Engaging the World – Confronting Injustice*. Running from 9 to 11 May, 2003, the AHA conference, *Making Humanism Count: Unity in Action*, focused on a revitalized Humanist activism. The event highlighted the diversity within Humanism, drawing speakers from both openly religious and staunchly atheistic Humanist organizations and with leaders from both local and international Humanism. This diversity highlighted the synergy between all who share the Humanist values of reason, democracy, and social justice.

A pre-conference seminar on 8 May, "Making Humanist Ethics Work", was led by Dr. Arthur Dobrin, leader emeritus of the Ethical Humanist Society of Long Island. A triple track of workshops began on Friday, relating to internal business and to addressing ways for Humanists to become more actively involved in public life. Covering hot button issues like gay rights, women's rights, the death penalty, and church-state separation, these workshops explored areas of social activism that mirror the AHA's increasingly public voice. The workshops also gave practical advice on how to make a difference on these issues.

During the membership plenary session it was revealed that AHA membership has broken historic records at over 6,000. Reasons include the improved look and quality of AHA publications, the revamped and vastly expanded Internet presence, and our reclaimed activist heritage – all raising awareness of Humanism among the general public.

Awardees and Speakers

On Friday night the AHA's annual Humanist of the Year award was presented to Rabbi Sherwin Wine. Founder and President of the Society for Humanistic Judaism, among other organizations, Wine was introduced as an outstanding individual who has given over 40 years of leadership, guidance, and care to the Birmingham Temple in Farmington Hills, Michigan. In his acceptance speech, Wine highlighted the need for Humanists to set aside inhibitions and reach out with their beliefs: "People are not their mouths or their intentions but their behaviour...If we don't have the behaviour, then all the language doesn't matter".

On Saturday afternoon, the Humanist Distinguished Service Award was presented to Gloria Feldt, president of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. Helen Thomas accepted the first Religious Liberty Award, presented by Edd Doerr, President of Americans

Humanism and Its Aspirations: Humanist Manifesto III

A milestone of the Humanist movement took place at this conference with the release and signing of *Humanism and Its Aspirations*, the successor to Humanist Manifestos I and II.

This document already has the signatures of 20 Nobel laureates, celebrities such as Oliver Stone, the 'Amazing' Randi, and Kurt Vonnegut; activists like Bill Baird, Werner Fornos, Arun Gandhi, and Vashti McCollum; as well as influential thinkers including Janet Jeppson Asimov, Richard Dawkins, Katha Pollitt, and Edward O. Wilson. This landmark document is now being placed in the hands of individual scholars, writers, publishers, and opinion leaders who can help it reach millions more.

Humanism and Its Aspirations marks a distinct evolution of thought, giving more emphasis to compassion as a motivating force and recognizing the emotive and inspirational elements in human life. This new document makes manifest the fullness of what it means to be human, touching on how we understand the world, how the world works, the source and nature of ethics, finding meaning in life, and working towards social justice.

Go to www.americanhumanist.org to add your signature to this pathfinding document.

for Religious Liberty. Thomas, the long-time 'dean' of the White House press corps and renowned journalist, was chosen because of her candour in speaking against school vouchers and the Bush administration's efforts to mix religion and politics.

The Humanist Heroine award was bestowed upon Kate Michelman, president of NARAL Pro-Choice America. Lester R. Brown, president of the Earth Policy Institute, closed the evening with a fascinating discussion of the economics of environmental protection and highlighted the future importance of wind power.

On Sunday, the conference closed with a plenary session featuring long-time consumer advocate Ralph Nader.

Humanism: Engaging the World – Confronting Injustice

Sunday 11 May saw the joint AHA/IHEU symposium, *Humanism: Engaging the World – Confronting Injustice*, a rare opportunity to see leaders from the AHA, IHEU, and other Humanist organizations from the US and around the world discuss Humanist issues on a global scale. Roy Brown, the newly elected president of IHEU, announced IHEU support for an international campaign to defend human rights in Islamic countries.

The AHA coordinated a Humanist Lobby Day on Monday 13 May to give US legislators a chance to understand better the strength of the AHA's grassroots membership.

The Washington, DC event was a notable success, with hundreds of Humanists participating in its banquets, meetings, workshops, and symposia which addressed Humanism in today's turbulent environment.

Roy Speckhardt is Director of Membership and Programs for the AHA.



IHEU-AHA joint symposium. From left: Babu Gogineni (IHEU), Robbi Robson (IHEU), Rob Buitenweg (IHEU), Tony Hileman (AHA).

IHEU and the Council of Europe

by Alexandre Marius dées de Sterio

Council of Europe and IHEU

The Council of Europe now has 45 European member states, the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro having been accepted in April 2003. It is a philosophical and law-oriented organization, dealing with all European or Europe-related issues, except questions related to the economic union of Europe, which is the business of the European Union, and military defence problems, which are dealt with by NATO.

IHEU has had the status of a recognized NGO in the field of humanist and secular values since 1954. NGOs with similar moral, philosophical, and ethical aims are very few: most NGOs close to our philosophy are rather specialized in their domain, like the International League for Child and Adult Education.

Representing IHEU

I am an active elected member of the Council of Europe's NGO Liaison Committee, and my term runs up to 2004. Dr. Georges Liénard from Belgium, a specialist in the fields of biotechnology, bioethics and euthanasia, has been my proxy since 1998. During my participation in the meetings of the various working groups and committees of the International NGOs (INGOs), I received assistance from Ms Silvia Geise, Ms Branka Geise, and Ms Silke Trommer, members of the German Free Religious Humanist Association. In addition, Ms Jacqueline Herremans represented IHEU as proxy at the euthanasia hearing of the Council of Europe held in the French Senate in October 2002. Her work there has been facilitated by the IHEU statement of 4 October 2002, issued in Brussels.

INGOs at the Council of Europe

INGOs operate primarily through groupings in key areas of interest, for example, human rights. Many INGOs are involved in several groupings. This is only natural, given their specific features and membership and, above all, their involvement in the major debates facing society, which, in the final analysis, are all interconnected.

INGO groupings held a total of 22 meetings in 2002. The main thrusts of the groupings' activities in 2002 were the future of the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights and possible INGO action in this area, as well as the groupings' work on the European Social Charter, for which they organized a special day of training on the collective complaints procedure. The INGOs have also established organic relations with the various Council of Europe bodies, i.e. the Directorates General, the Committee of Ministers, the Steering Committees and the Commissioner, as well as with UNESCO and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, the North-South Centre in Lisbon, and EU institutions. At the same time, almost all the groupings maintain regular contact with the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe (participation in Congress sessions, specialized committee meetings and conferences).

In 2002, during a special session organized by the European grouping of the INGOs actively associated with the Council of Europe and the European Union, Dr. Georges Liénard made a remarkable statement on the secular point of view concerning bioethics. In the media working group, I presented an exposé on lobbying for values in international bodies. Both exposés are to be published.

IHEU, European Court of Human Rights and European Social Charter

IHEU has *amicus curiae* status with the European Court of Human Rights and that of a correspondent organization to the European Social Charter. That gives us special rights to inform and to be active by lodging a complaint. For example, IHEU is one of the 40 select NGOs which can lodge a complaint on any issue relating to violation of the provisions of the European Social Charter. While we have not introduced any collective complaints in the past few years, we are represented at the meetings of the European Social Charter Working Groups.

In 2002 I helped the Norwegian Humanist Association, a member organization of IHEU, to lodge a complaint against the Norwegian state. Norwegian legislation has a Christian general clause for school education, and the complaint of the Norwegian Humanists was that this is discrimination against non-Christian minorities, as they are denied the right of exemption from these classes (application no. 1547/02, Folgero *et al.* vs. Norway). IHEU headquarters also issued a statement of support, and this was very welcome.

Recommendations: Information and Communication

The activities of the Council of Europe need to be better taken into consideration by Humanist publications, in a positive or in a critical way as necessary. The Norwegian case in the European Court of Human Rights and the debate surrounding voluntary euthanasia form good examples. This would engage our grass roots workers and members in international activity.

Working for Humanism Internationally

As Humanist representatives at the Council of Europe we not only act for the exclusive and explicit aims of IHEU, but for the progress of the humanistic life stance in general. Of course, IHEU is the only Humanist organization operating on a world-wide basis, being represented at all the international institutions, having general activities in the context of a Humanist world vision, which enables us to help other organizations where our aims overlap.

An international organization lives or disappears in the public and institutional minds with its international representation. If there is no international representation, there will be no more influence and no more presence in the public opinion. The image of an organization depends on it: Amnesty International or the Human Rights Leagues would not be known worldwide if they were only acting locally and not in international institutions too.

Prof. Alexandre Marius dées de Sterio is IHEU's main representative at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg.

The Gods of War

by *Mustafa Kamal Pasha**

In an interview with Dan Rather, President Saddam Hussein of Iraq replied with reference to Allah and Islam when asked about his possible exile, defeat, and death. In a similar vein, President G.W. Bush has spoken of the divine mission he has been entrusted with to save the world and civilization by chasing out the evil of terrorism. Similarly Osama Bin Laden in his taped addresses declares that fighting against America "should be for the sake of Allah".

In which god do they believe? Surely there is not one but many gods with different names, each exhorting his followers to destroy the faithful followers of other gods! There cannot be just one god, for even within Islam, the Allah of the Sunni Muslims would not tolerate the Allah of the Shia sect or of other sects, just as the Catholic god forces his followers to bomb those of the Protestant god and vice versa in Northern Ireland. The Christ of German Catholicism was surely supporting Nazis in World War II, but giving his beneficence to anti-Nazi Catholics in America and other European countries, alongside the Christ of Anglicanism. And what of the god of the Jews ...?

John Donnelly of the *Boston Globe* observes, "In the midst of a war on terrorism and before a war in Iraq, the two combatants are not shy about invoking the name of God. And (ironically) both President Bush and Osama Bin Laden fervently assert that God is on their side..." Melissa Rogers, Executive Director of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life in Washington said, "no one equates Bush's stance with bin Laden's hateful use of religion in which bin Laden [like Saddam] calls for the Muslim world to unite against the [infidel] United States and abuse religion to encourage and validate the murder of innocents." On the other hand, a president's reliance on faith and his expressed confidence that (his) god blesses America is greatly worrying as this rhetoric overtly expresses that war on terrorism is, in reality, a war between gods (or different brands of god). Scholars cited recent passages from the President's speeches: in a speech to religious broadcasters, in which he used the word 'faith' 29 times, Bush said, "I welcome faith to help solve the nation's deepest problems". In his State of the Union address on 28 January, immediately after citing the dangers posed by Iraq, Bush called on Americans to place "our confidence in the loving God behind all of life and all of history. May He guide us now." Likewise, at the National Prayer Breakfast on 6 February, Bush declared, "Events aren't moved by blind change and chance. Behind all of life and all of history, there is dedication and purpose, set by the hand of a just and faithful God". (What about God's purpose and dedication in unleashing wars, allowing the Holocaust, famines, floods, poverty, misery...?)

Although Ari Fleischer, the White House spokesperson, has said repeatedly that the President makes his judgement on Iraq and other issues as a secular leader, Richard Cizik, Vice President for Government Affairs at the National Association of Evangelicals in Washington, claims that Bush was playing the presidential role of a healer, the role of a priest in consoling the nation in the loss of lives. Many outsiders point to what they perceive as a missionary zeal to some of the administration's major decisions. Some also point to the possible influence of Bush's speechwriter, Michael Gerson, an evangelical Christian.

The frequent use of religion in Bush's speeches also came amidst a conflict within religious circles on whether or not to go to war against Iraq. Pope John Paul II and the US Conference of Catholic Bishops have different inspirations and motivations from the Protestant god when they oppose the war on Iraq.

With the US President using religious references again and again in talking about a conflict with Iraq, the war has been rightly drummed up as a 'war of religions'. "The more I listen to him, the more truly worried I become about the vision of this country in the world," said Hurst Hannum, a professor of International Law at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. "It's so...Christian-centric." When Bush told the religious broadcasters that he welcomes faith to solve the nation's problems, C. Welton Gaddy, President of the Interfaith Alliance in Washington, said he asked himself, "What faith? Is it the President's faith or the Muslim faith, or the Jewish faith? Whose faith is it?" Gaddy is worried about the impact of politicizing religion. "Unfortunately, if you pulled a lot of people on the streets of America, I fear that because of Laden's [and Saddam's] words, they would tell you that most Muslims support terrorism... By the same token, if you walk on the streets of Baghdad or in some European cities, you'll find the person in the street with the perception that evangelical Christians support the war on Iraq."

With all the rhetoric from Osama, Saddam, and his Islamic cohorts, as well as from President Bush's speeches, the war on Iraq has seemed overwhelmingly a 'war of gods', by the agents of gods, for the glory of gods.

"Organize under the message of Islam and [with Jihad] conquer the whole world."

Maulana Maudoodi, late head, *Jamaat-i-Islami*, Pakistan

"The President believes God has chosen him to lead the US in a war against Evil."

Jack Beatty, senior editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*.

**The author is writing under a pseudonym.*

Defending Human Rights in Islamic Countries

The General Assembly of IHEU agreed at its meeting in Washington on 13 May that IHEU should lend its support to an international campaign defending human rights in Islamic countries.

The campaign is the initiative of a number of Muslim, human rights, and women's rights organizations. Its purpose is to raise awareness of, and to campaign against, the denial of internationally accepted standards of human rights to both Muslims and non-Muslims, women and men, living in the Islamic world. The campaign will be web-based with an online petition and detailed information in 13 languages on the origins of the Sharia, how it works in practice, and how it falls short of the requirements for a just and equitable system of law.

Many feel that the rise in fundamentalism has been fuelled by the failures of secular governments in Muslim countries to tackle basic economic problems, and by former actions of the west, which have been exploited by extremist elements to present political Islam as the only form of resistance. Strict Sharia law has now been imposed in several countries including Iran, Pakistan, and the Sudan and in a number of states in northern Nigeria. It was notorious in Afghanistan under the Taliban for its oppression of women and for the brutality of its punishments. The campaign is urgently needed by the moderate Muslim community to help confront the increasing violence and intolerance of political Islam.

The Executive Committee of IHEU is in touch with the organizers of the campaign and member organizations will be kept fully informed as plans for the campaign develop. What follows is an edited transcript of a presentation on the Sharia and human rights at IHEU's Washington meeting.

Introduction

Islam is an all-encompassing religion that demands total submission to the will of God. Islamic law, the Sharia, prescribes every aspect of private behaviour and public conduct.

Muslims believe that the main elements of the Sharia were revealed by God to Muhammad, his Prophet, between about 610 and 630 C.E. They are documented in the Koran and in the Hadith – traditions which it is claimed have been handed down in an unbroken line from the Prophet and his companions. Surprisingly perhaps for laws which emanate directly from God, there is not one school of Sharia law, but five. The four orthodox (Sunni) versions differ somewhat from one another and from the fifth, the Shi'ite school. Nevertheless all five schools share sufficient characteristics that we can still speak in general of *the* Sharia as though it were a single body of law. One or other of these versions of Sharia forms the basis of the law in most Islamic countries, from the more liberal, such as in Indonesia or Bangladesh, to the most harshly conservative – as in Saudi Arabia, or Iran.



A woman is hanged in Iran. Hanging is used as a punishment under Sharia for blasphemy, apostasy, and other 'crimes'.

The Sharia defines and controls everything: from how to prepare for prayer to when and how to pray; from the provision of dowries to behaviour during women's menstruation; from the amputation of limbs for theft to the stoning of adulterers and killing of apostates; from the preparation and handling of food to the giving of evidence in a court of law. No detail of daily life, public or private, escapes its attention. The individual is barely at liberty to think or decide for himself. Virtually all activity is preordained; one has but to accept Allah's laws as interpreted by the mullahs and ayatollahs.

Islam claims to have been founded 'in the full light of history'. We are told that Muhammad was a historical figure and a wealth of written evidence can be traced in unbroken line directly back to him and his immediate followers. It is this claim that gives Islam particular strength. Although it is a claim that is being increasingly questioned by modern scholarship, it nevertheless enables the fundamentalists to argue strongly against any reinterpretation of the Koran or the Hadith on which the Sharia is based.

The necessity of belief

The Koran, the holy book of Islam, is believed by Muslims to have been communicated to the Prophet

Muhammad “as a final expression of God’s will and purpose for man”. But to deny this claim, in any Islamic state, is blasphemy, and in some states punishable by death.

Modernity

It is still possible even today, of course, to find Christian and Jewish sects that try to adhere closely to the tenets of the founders, but the majority of both Christians and Jews have to a greater or lesser extent come to terms with modernity. There are today far more secular Jews than fundamentalists, and far more Christians happy with the separation of church and state than those who would like to see the return of theocratic government. But in Islam the state itself is seen as merely another human construct and as such lacking in legitimacy – unless its structure and laws conform to the higher law of Islam. The very concept of separation of religion and state is unimaginable in any truly Islamic society because every human institution including government must conform to holy writ.

Christianity did not give up theocratic control of society without a fight. Judaism is still engaged in the fight in the state of Israel. Less than three hundred years ago the church in Europe was still ordering men and women to be burned at the stake for heresy, for witchcraft or for defying its will. In Europe, the decline of the church’s hold on government has been slow and is still not complete.

The Western Struggle to Separate Religion and State

Three major factors have played a role in loosening the stranglehold of the church on government in the west. First, Jesus, who Christians believe is the son of God, drew a distinction between duty to God and duty to the temporal law in saying “Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s and unto God that which is God’s”.

Secondly, the scientific revolution that had its birth following the Renaissance of 15th century Europe again made possible the contemplation and study of the natural world. The ideas of the Renaissance were not snuffed out as they could so easily have been by the power of the church, but have continued to flourish. The claims of science, unlike divine revelation, can be tested by experience. Any scientific theory that fails to explain the world as we observe it will be replaced by one that better accords with observation. Divine revelation, on the other hand, provides answers that must be accepted since, coming from God, they cannot be challenged even if they are plainly wrong. We see this phenomenon at work today in America where Protestant fundamentalists reject the overwhelming evidence in favour of biological evolution because it conflicts with what they believe is the word of God.

The third great influence on the west was the Reformation, and the idea that man could have direct contact with his God. God’s word, and man’s conscience, would from then on be his guide. Everyone is thus empowered to hear and interpret God’s word for themselves without the intercession of the church or its priesthood.

Much of the social progress of the past two centuries can be credited to the courage and energy of the pioneers who introduced reforms such as public health, the abolition of slavery, even democracy itself, against the violent opposition of the established order, aided and abetted as always by the church. Such progress would scarcely have been possible without the belief that a man’s conscience should be his guide. Without the revolution of individual conscience there would have been no concept of individual responsibility or of individual rights. Without the Renaissance and the Reformation there could have been no Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In the Islamic world, no such reformation has happened.

The Sharia and The State

In much of the Islamic world, Sharia law forcefully opposes free thought, freedom of expression and freedom of action. Accusations of impurity, impiety or apostasy are waiting to silence any voice of dissent. Suppression and injustice shape the lives of all free-minded people, above all atheists, who are deprived of all freedom. One is born a Muslim, and one is forced to stay a Muslim to the end of one’s life. Islamic law denies the rights of women and non-Muslims. Unbelievers are shown no tolerance: the choice is death or conversion. Jews and Christians are treated as second-class citizens.

In countries which have proclaimed an Islamic state, such as Iran, the Sudan, Pakistan, some states in northern Nigeria, and Afghanistan under the Taliban, we can see the pernicious effects of the Sharia: the stoning to death of women exercising their right to personal freedom; random accusations of blasphemy carrying a mandatory death penalty being used to settle personal grudges; public hangings for apostasy, real or alleged, and many other acts of wanton cruelty.

In the Islamic world it is not the people, nor indeed the government, but ‘God’s word’ that shapes society. In an open and free society, people define the boundaries and powers of the organs of the state; the powers of the state derive from the people through their elected representatives. In an Islamic state all law derives from God, and no mere human agency, parliament or dictator, can be permitted to pass any law that contravenes God’s laws – as interpreted by the mullahs or ayatollahs. Thus in an Islamic state Islamic law is automatically part of the system. In Saudi Arabia, for example, the Koran has been declared to be the constitution to which all laws must conform. Placing divine authority above the will of the people is clearly incompatible with the very idea of democracy.

There is a further problem with the Sharia in that it was formulated at a time and in a society lacking any concept of the corporation or public institution. In the west, the church is itself an institution. No such concept exists in Islam. We cannot speak of “the mosque” as an entity, nor even of Islam itself as an institution in Islamic society. Islam *is* society. Neither does the idea of government as an institution, separate from the person of

the governor, exist in Islam. The Sharia is therefore silent not only on any law governing public bodies, but on the very concept of the public institution. This makes it very difficult to apply the Sharia consistently to modern life. It also raises a question as to the legitimacy of *any* public body or government that is not run by God's representatives. It is interesting, for example, that the House of Saud claim legitimacy not as the Royal House of Saudi Arabia but as 'Protectors of the Holy Places'. The idea of the Caliphate remains very much alive. In Islam, the concept of a secular constitution, like the concept of democratic lawmaking, is by definition illegitimate.

The Sharia and Human Rights

Many aspects of the Sharia are inimical to the ideas enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). No individual or group of people can have any rights that do not conform to the tenets of the Sharia. Oppression, intimidation, public executions, lack of freedom, and ferocious censorship are the undeniable facts of life in many Islamic societies. The UDHR enumerates the rights of the individual that governments are obliged to protect. But Islam is opposed to any concept of individual freedom that is not subordinate to the will of God.

"What they call human rights is nothing but a collection of corrupt rules worked out by the Zionists to destroy all true religions."

Ayatollah Khomeini

"When we want to find out what is right and what is wrong we do not go the United Nations; we go to the Holy Koran . . ."

Ayatollah Moussave-Khomenehi

The views of Ayatollah Khomeini were extreme even within Islam, of course, but perhaps more insidious are the claims of the apologists that there is no contradiction between Islam and human rights, straining to identify modern human rights within Islamic law. Maulana Maudoodi, the founder of *Jamaat-i-Islami* and the father of political Islam was one such, but, as Ann E. Mayer has pointed out, what he claimed to be human *rights* can be seen on closer analysis to be either *privileges* granted by God, or *human duties* towards God.

The Universal *Islamic* Declaration of Human Rights is an attempt dating from the early 1980s to square the circle. It reworks many of the rights familiar from the UDHR and adds others. But many fall far short of the internationally agreed standards of the UDHR. Furthermore, this and other Islamic human rights schemes are of dubious validity even in Islamic terms:

"The Islamic human rights schemes ... are the products of the political contexts in which they emerged. Their Islamic pedigrees are dubious and the principles they contain do not represent the result of rigorous, scholarly analyses of the Islamic sources... Instead, they seem largely shaped by their conservative authors' negative reactions to the model of freedom in Western societies."

Ann E. Mayer, *Islam and Human Rights*

Many Islamists claim that the UDHR is an attempt to force western standards and ideals on to others who do not share them. But abuse of human rights cannot be excused by cultural relativism. If we believe that everyone has the right to life, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness then we must oppose any system which seeks to deny those rights to others. To accept religion, culture or tradition as a justification for human rights abuses is to discriminate against the abused and to send the message that the victims are undeserving of humane consideration.

Perhaps the most unsavoury aspect of Islamic law from a human rights perspective is the severity of the punishments it prescribes. Like the most prurient voyeur, the Sharia pries into every aspect of private life and condemns with the utmost violence any conduct that fails to conform to its narrow standards of acceptable "family" behaviour. Adultery, or indeed any behaviour that fails to conform, is punishable by flogging, amputation or stoning to death. Homosexuality, too, is forbidden and punishable by flogging, sometimes to death. To add to the inhumane nature of the executions, they are frequently carried out in public – to act as a warning to others.

The Sharia and Women's Rights

According to the Koran and the Sharia, despite declarations of the equality of the sexes before God, women are manifestly treated as inferior to men, and have fewer rights and responsibilities. A woman counts as half a man in giving evidence in a court of law, or in matters of inheritance. Her position is less advantageous than a man's with regard to marriage and divorce. A husband has the moral and religious right and duty to beat his wives for disobedience or for perceived misconduct. A woman does not have the right to choose her husband, her clothing, or her place of residence, or to travel freely. Any conduct that undermines the idea that women are the property of their menfolk, or that threatens male domination, will fall foul of the Sharia.

The legal age of marriage varies from country to country, ranging from 9 in Iran to 13, 15 or 17 (in Tunisia). The choice of 9 in Iran follows from the marriage of Mohammed to Aisha, consummated when she was 9 and the Prophet was over 50. It should be noted, however, that the Prophet was allowed many actions by Allah that were denied to the other faithful, and not all Muslim scholars would accept the Aisha marriage as a precedent.

The four Sunni schools of law and that of the Shi'ites differ on a number of points important to women. In all schools, however, marriage is a contract according to which the husband should perform sexually and provide materially for the wife. The wife must have sex whenever the husband wishes. A man can easily divorce a woman by pronouncing that he is divorcing her three times. Polygamy with up to four wives is permitted, and in the Shi'ite sect, temporary marriage is allowed whereby a man can have access to an unlimited number of women. The practice is known as *Mot'a* or *Sigheh*. Men are also permitted concubines and female slaves.

No Muslim woman is allowed to marry a non-Muslim man whereas Muslim men are allowed to marry non-Muslim women. With the object of protecting morality and preventing sexual anarchy, women are expected to cover their whole bodies bar their faces and their hands up to their wrists. The Sharia is totally opposed to freedom of dress. This is obviously a huge infringement on the personal development of women, not allowing them to develop sexually and as people. It is a tragic irony that women are imprisoned behind veils when it is the men who, according to Islamic law, cannot be trusted to control themselves. On the pretext of protecting their honour women are kept locked up, isolated and unable to enjoy a full life or to develop their potential.

In order to protect their morality women can have no contact with men to whom they are not related without the presence of a male relative. The segregation of sexes in this way makes it very difficult for women to leave their houses and participate in society in any way at all. Under the Taliban many war widows were prevented from earning their living and were forced into starvation. Their crime? Had they prayed harder their husbands would have survived!

Many apologists for Islam, women among them, argue that women are happy in their roles in Islamic society, happy to be afforded the protection of their menfolk and to be kept away from the gaze of other men. But this is a false argument. If some women want to stay at home under the protection of their menfolk they can do so. But do the apologists for Islam have the right to tell all other women, including non-Muslims, how they should behave? Women deserve to be treated as autonomous human beings and for this reason alone the misogynistic Sharia should be opposed.

The Sharia and Discrimination Against Non-Muslims

In addition to the imposition of Islamic morality on non-Muslims, Sharia law dictates that there shall be no equality between Muslims and non-Muslims. Under strict Sharia law only Muslims can be full citizens of an Islamic state. Many states shamelessly discriminate against non-Muslims. In Saudi Arabia and Kuwait being Muslim is a precondition of naturalization. Christians and Jews have limited rights but they may not participate in public life or hold positions of authority over Muslims. Anyone other than a Muslim, Christian or Jew is deemed to be an unbeliever and is not permitted to reside permanently in an Islamic state. The Koran only recognizes the People of the Book as religious communities.

In criminal prosecutions non-Muslims are given harsher punishments than Muslims. Crimes against Muslims are often punished more severely than crimes against others. In court under the Sharia the testimony of a non-Muslim carries less weight than that of a Muslim.

Freedom of Religion and belief

Freedom of religion and belief does not mean merely the freedom to *have* a faith but also the freedom to *change*

one's religion or belief. But under the Sharia, apostasy (either advocating the rejection of Islamic belief or announcing such rejection by word or deed) is not permitted and for a man is punishable by death. The punishment for a woman may be more lenient, although opinions differ. She might be spared, but only to stay in prison until she reverts, however long it takes. Even when the death penalty is not applied, those accused of apostasy can be subject to the most violent treatment. This discrimination is clearly contrary to freedom of religion and belief and to the principle that religion should be a private matter for the individual. In a feeble attempt to disguise the Islamic attitude to apostasy, apologists often quote the Koranic verse: "There shall be no compulsion in religion". For a Muslim wishing to leave Islam this is simply not true.

The Islamic position on apostasy has been described as: "total disbelief that any sane person could possibly have a genuine reason for leaving 'the most perfect religion'. He or she must therefore, by definition, be acting in bad faith". Really? Read *Leaving Islam*, edited by Ibn Warraq (Prometheus, 2003) for the testimonies of over 20 brave souls who have done just that.

Belief in any religion should be voluntary and a private matter, but more often than not it is a collective statement and part of our identity. Typically, we inherit our religious belief from our parents, and share the beliefs of the community of which we are part. For most of us, our religion is more a matter of tradition, loyalty and custom than of deeply held belief. But for Muslims there is the added incentive of the severest penalties for any who wish to leave. One may ask the question of how strong a religion is if it has to force its adherents to stay under penalty of death.

Freedom of Expression

Under the Sharia and where Islam holds sway, writers, thinkers, philosophers, activists, and artists are frequently denied freedom of expression. Islamic regimes are notorious for the violent suppression of free thought. Often, as a government aligns itself closely with Islam, any critics of the government will be accused of heresy, blasphemy or insulting Islam. Under the Sharia people are deprived of many pleasures such as drinking alcohol, playing music, even of reading literature or philosophy, and are denied the opportunity of fully expressing their sexuality or of enjoying the arts.

Islamophobia and Racism

It is frequently claimed that critics of Islam are guilty of racism and Islamophobia. But since we are discussing religion and not race, the first charge fails. Certainly in the west there is a high degree of correlation between race and religion. The Muslims in Britain, for example, tend to be of Middle Eastern origin or from the Indian subcontinent, but nevertheless it is dangerous to confuse race and religion. Efforts to make Islamophobia a crime are thinly disguised attempts to equate arguments against Islam with racism. The very term *Islamophobia* is misleading. A phobia is an irrational fear. How can a fear

be made a crime? It is essential to distinguish criticism of Islam from both fear of Islam and from fear, hatred or contempt for Muslims. It is perfectly feasible to love the believer but hate the belief. Human beings are worthy of respect but not all beliefs must be respected. Yet moral criticism of Islamic practices or criticism of Islamic religion is often dismissed and demonized as Islamophobic.

No belief, rational or irrational, scientific or divinely inspired, should be exempt from critical examination. If a belief is sound it will stand on its own merits. If it is unsound it deserves to fail. No religion should seek immunity from the examination of its claims, or seek freedom from moral criticism of its practices.

Why Islamic Law Must Be Opposed

Islamic law should be open to analysis, research and criticism like any other system of practice and belief. The claim that its laws are divinely inspired should no more shield it from criticism than Christianity should have been spared criticism for burning heretics or for massacring unbelievers. The more pernicious aspects of Islamic law fall far short of the standards widely accepted by the international community.

Islamic law, the Sharia, should be opposed for its

imposition of theocracy over democracy, its abuse of human rights, its institutionalized discrimination, its denial of human dignity and individual autonomy, its punishment of alternative lifestyle choices, and for the severity of its punishments.

In the west, even in countries which have a sizeable Muslim minority, any idea that the Sharia could have any sway should be strongly opposed since it conflicts with many basic human values, such as equality before the law; that punishments should be commensurate with the crime; and that the law must be based on the will of the people. Islamic law as it developed in the first few centuries of Islam incorporated many pre-Islamic Middle-Eastern misogynist and tribal customs and traditions. The Sharia developed not only from the Koran and the Sunna but through juristic reasoning and interpretation from other sects. We may ask how a law whose elements were first laid down over 1,000 years ago can possibly be relevant in the 21st century. The Sharia reflects the social and economic conditions at the time of the Abbasids and has become further and further out of touch with later social, economic, cultural and moral developments. The principles of the Sharia are inimical to moral progress, humanity and civilized values.



An Afghan woman being beaten by the Taliban's 'virtue police' for not covering herself properly. Such beatings were not confined to Afghanistan under the Taliban: they occur regularly in countries following strict Islamic law. Photo: Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (Rawa; www.rawa.org).

The problem for all of us is how to oppose the violations of human rights inherent in Islamic law without being accused of cultural imperialism, neo-colonialism and racism, or of failing to respect 'the other'. But cultural relativism is not the answer. In India, each religion has its own social laws. Muslim women do not enjoy the same rights as Hindu women. Why not? Justice cries out for secularism. One law for all – equality before the law – has to be the answer.

Many of the arguments for permitting each religion or culture to determine its own laws are based on a misunderstanding of the nature of human rights. Human rights as defined in the UDHR are vested in the individual, not the group. As soon as rights are accorded to a group rather than to individuals, conflict becomes possible not only between one group and another, but between the group and its own members. Any group that denies the right of its members to leave is in contravention of one of the most fundamental principles of human rights. Yet clearly, one of the reasons for the growth of Islam over the past century has been that becoming a Muslim is a one-way street. Whether by birth or conversion, once you are a Muslim the only way out, under the Sharia, is death.

When Islam really does advocate jihad to achieve world domination, then anyone deeply concerned with humanity will be critical. Of all the existing ideologies and religions, Islam remains the greatest danger to humanity. It has neither been tamed nor moderated by progressive forces. Political Islam has the power to inspire the terrorist mind, and, through its ties to oil-rich states, the funds to pursue its plans.

Apologists for Islam often claim that many so-called violations of human rights are based on a misreading of the Koran and will quote this or that sura in its defence. But the arguments against Islam are not primarily against its holy text, although there is much to criticize, but against the *practices* of Islam. We are told that Islam is a religion of peace and that the struggle, jihad, for world conquest is not to be taken literally. Perhaps someone should tell the suicide bombers. But like the Christian Bible, the Koran has arguments to support every point of view. The only possible response to the charge of misunderstanding or misreading is to look at the reality of what is happening in those countries such

as Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and northern Nigeria that have fallen under the sway of the Sharia.

The world is a battleground of social movements and ideas. It took people in the west over 400 years of often-bloody struggle to gain the right to criticize Christianity. Even now, that right is still not fully recognized. In Britain, for example, there is still a law against blasphemy, and many Islamic clerics have argued that it should be extended to cover Islam as well. It should be scrapped. Once we are prevented from expressing our point of view in the market place of ideas we will be heading back to the Dark Ages.

We must recognize that our society is far larger, diverse and more complex than the primitive tribal society of 7th century Arabia from which Islam sprang. It is time to renounce the idea that anyone should live under the Sharia. More than ever before, people need a secular state that respects freedom of and *from* religion, and human rights founded on the principle that power belongs to the people. This means that we must reject the claims of orthodox Islamic scholars that, in an Islamic state, sovereignty belongs to the representative of Allah or to Islamic justice. Indeed it demands that the very concept of an Islamic state be challenged. It is crucial to oppose the Sharia to enable Muslims to join the modern, secular world.

What is needed is nothing less than the secularization of Islamic society, and the establishment of the idea that the individual conscience must be the guide and judge of personal, private conduct. But this cannot be imposed from outside by force. Attempts to impose the ideas of democracy and human rights from outside will be resisted as neo-colonialism or American imperialism and draw ordinary Muslims closer to the extremists. The ideas of personal freedom, progress and change must be sown from within Islamic society by Muslims and former Muslims themselves, aided and abetted of course by those of us in the west who share their ideals and hopes for the future.

The way will be long and hard, but the history of human society has shown that, once lit, the spark of individual freedom cannot be extinguished.

Contributors: Azam Kamgouian, Fatemolla, Roy Brown, Ibn Warraq, Lars Gule



Coming of Age – the Non-Religious Way

Non-religious confirmations for teenagers, sometimes also called civil confirmations or coming-of-age ceremonies, are popular in Nordic European countries. Non-religious confirmations form an alternative to traditional religious confirmations. Several Humanist organizations offer these ceremonies to young people as their main Humanist youth activity. The form of the confirmations and preparatory activities vary, from camps (in Finland and Sweden, for instance) to courses (Iceland, Norway). But the main element is to celebrate and think about the new responsibilities that adulthood brings.

The Humanist Association of Germany offers non-religious confirmations and this has stimulated the growth of Humanist youth groups in several German cities, including Berlin (the JuHu). Gregor Ziese-Henatsch describes their history below. Young Humanists attending the International Humanist Youth Conference jointly organized by IHEYO and Berlin JuHu will have the opportunity to visit some of these events personally!

Gea Meijers

Youth Work in the Humanist Association of Germany in Berlin

In Berlin, the Humanist Association of Germany is mainly involved in two branches of activity with young people outside school or kindergarten:

1. Coming-of-Age Ceremonies (called *JugendFEIER*) for eighth-grade students (aged 13–14).
2. The activities of its own youth organization, *Junge HumanistInnen* (JuHu).

JugendFEIER has a long tradition. It developed out of what was called *Jugendweihe* until the late 1980s. Towards the middle of the 19th century, the Civil Revolution provoked not only political emancipation. Some citizens also turned away from the big churches and organized themselves in free religious congregations. These free congregations invented *Jugendweihe* as their alternative to the Christian confirmation. While these first congregations were rather liberal-minded and in some cases even nationalist organizations, the rise of the working class movement brought big changes to them: many turned into politically oriented cultural organizations of the socialist movement. In Berlin the first proletarian *Jugendweihe*, with socialist rather than freethought content, was conducted in 1889. After that, *Jugendweihe* developed fast and in the 1920s were conducted by all kinds of organizations with social democratic or communist orientation. One of them was the German Freethinkers, the predecessor of the Humanist Association in Berlin. In 1933 the freethinkers were dissolved by the Nazi government and many of their functionaries were persecuted and even murdered.

After the war and the liberation of Germany these organizations were re-established and *Jugendweihe* were conducted again. While this was uncomplicated in West Germany and West Berlin, the East German authorities stopped these activities at the end of the 1940s because they feared disputes with the churches they wanted to gain as partners in building up a socialist Germany. However, this policy was changed totally in 1953/54, when they introduced *Jugendweihe* as a ritual for all students of the eighth grade. From then on it was

conducted as a quasi state ritual and the numbers rejecting participation grew ever smaller. By the time East Germany collapsed in 1989 more than 90% of eighth-grade students participated in *Jugendweihe*. In contrast to its popularity in East Germany it became less and less popular in West Germany, as *Jugendweihe* was perceived as a communist ritual of the GDR, and by 1989 the numbers participating in West Berlin had sunk to fewer than 200 per year. Nevertheless, after the destruction of the Wall and the unification of Germany *Jugendweihe*, surprisingly, remained popular in the Eastern part of Germany.

In Berlin, *JugendFEIER* peaked at almost 4,000 participants in 2002, though it has subsequently declined, probably as a combination of demographic and economic reasons. Our *JugendFEIER* consists of various courses and spare time activities that we offer in autumn and winter before the ceremonies take place in spring every year. However, it is not necessary to participate in these activities in order to take part in the actual *JugendFEIER* ceremony, and almost half the ceremony participants do not take part in the preparatory activities. Nevertheless, *JugendFEIER* and similar activities of another organization – still called *Jugendweihe* – have the highest degree of voluntary participation among young people in East Germany.

Compared to this high level of participation our youth organization, Berlin JuHu, is fairly small: about 200 young people, mainly aged between 18 and 30. Many of us have been former participants of *JugendFEIER* and have got to know the Humanist movement in this way. The activities of JuHu include a lot of travel and tourism and various other activities such as cookery classes, parlour games, sports and outdoor activities. We also run a youth club and a small school club for pupils of a primary school in the centre of Berlin. In September this year we will host the IHEYO-Conference in Berlin. We hope to see you there!

Gregor Ziese-Henatsch

International Humanist Youth Conference 2003 29 August–2 September, Berlin, Germany

The youth section of IHEU is once again organizing an international Humanist youth conference! The IHEYO Youth Conference will be held from 29 August to 2 September in Berlin and will be co-hosted with the German JuHu, the youth organization of the Humanistischer Verband Deutschlands.

The conference is for young people between 15 and 35 years of age. The programme will consist of workshops, discussions about Humanism, a city game, and visits to local youth Humanist activities. It will also include IHEYO's first General Assembly, in which participants will vote on a constitution. The organizers encourage all Humanist organizations to send youth representatives to this conference, which offers a marvellous opportunity to explore youth Humanism at an international level.

Practical Details

The fee will be €65 (€150 for late registration) and includes accommodation and all meals during the conference. Accommodation will be in a youth hostel located in the centre of Berlin. For further details about the conference, including deadlines for registration and registration forms, please visit the IHEYO website or email youth@iheu.org.

Student Humanism in America: the SSA

by *Stephanie Kirmer*

Humanism in the United States has issues to face that are quite unique among countries in the first world. The control of religion over culture and government is worrisome, but it is also bounded by the paradox of the First Amendment to the US Constitution, prohibiting government sponsorship of religion. When asked, I find it extremely difficult to reconcile these two aspects, but I know that religion is a predominant and sometimes overwhelming force in American government, because I see the effects of it every day. From the fierce debate over reproductive rights, with most of the opposition coming from the fanatical religious right, to the alteration of the national motto to read "In God We Trust", to crises in state governments over the teaching of evolution in schools, the religious right is running amok in much of the political realm in the US.

The organization I represent, the Secular Student Alliance (SSA), tackles issues where religion oversteps its boundaries and infringes on the rights of students in high schools and universities. We also encourage students to organize local groups to provide community and support for Humanists in their area. While the SSA is not the only American organization whose intention is to support secular student groups on campuses, it is the only independent national organization run by students and recent students that exists for this purpose in the US. The SSA was founded in Spring 2000 by a group of students in order to create an organization to both work with local student groups and to represent students within the national movement, separate from other, non-student organizations.

According to a recent Gallup poll, 17% of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 describe themselves as secular – that is four times the proportion of secular citizens older than 65. By no means all of this group will want to be involved in the organized Humanist movement, but this statistic reveals the importance of the student movement in the US. Most of the membership of American Humanist organizations is over 40 years old. This means that young people of secular inclination are not being attracted to the movement in adequate numbers, so organizations like the SSA are that much more important.

We have a set of core values that govern the activities we take part in. For example, we're interested in making sure there is no stigma attached to positive, humanistic, secular world views, and we want mutually respectful relationships between theists and non-theists. We would like to create more understanding of non-theistic viewpoints among our mostly theistic communities. We also believe very strongly in cooperation between organizations of the secular community to achieve our goals, and we wish to put any historic animosity between freethought groups behind us. As a minority population in the US, we know that we will accomplish much more working together than we can individually. And finally,



SSA Board Members Stephanie Kirmer, Jeff Dubin, August E. Brunzman IV, and Jende Huang at SSA's 2002 conference, 'Education against Indoctrination'.

we wish to influence public policy to make the US more tolerant and even welcoming of its secular citizens.

Activism is of course our top priority, and we are always taking steps to provide better services and assistance to students. Our full-time Campus Organizer, Robert Nekervis, works closely with university student groups to encourage stability and growth among them, though they are far outmatched in number and budget by Christian evangelical groups on US campuses. The college organizing budget of the Campus Crusade for Christ, with over 1600 groups in US campuses, is estimated at being \$250 million per year. Nevertheless we feel optimistic that we can accomplish much with Rob's help. SSA activities include mailing Humanist literature to high school students, providing free internet resources to student groups through a cooperative project with the Institute for Humanist Studies, and distributing grants to student groups for local activism and event hosting. Groups are encouraged to network with other student groups, local adult groups, and national organizations like American Atheists, Council for Secular Humanism, the American Humanist Association, and the Institute for Humanist Studies, as well as international organizations including IHEU. We also host an annual conference, and have so far conducted three. Our fourth will be in 2004 in Washington, DC.

Our most important plan for the future is the Broad Base programme, which entails bringing the number of active secular campus groups up from 100 to 250 by Spring 2006. We have created a system by which we quantify the levels of function of individual groups, which allows us to provide support for groups at risk of failing. We also hope to expand web-based support for groups and group leaders.

I hope this overview of the SSA gives a taste of the energy and effort to get things going. With such enthusiasm and dedication, student Humanism in the US surely has a great future ahead!

Stephanie Kirmer is a Board member of the Secular Student Alliance and a sophomore in European Studies and Sociology at the University of Kansas.

Fighting for Women's Rights in Iraq

by Houzan Mahmoud

I am a Kurdish woman born and brought up in northern Iraq. I feel compelled to write about Iraqi women because I cannot find, in the vast media coverage of Iraq, an image of Iraqi women that fits my own, or that of my many female Iraqi friends, colleagues and acquaintances.

The majority of women in Iraq that I see in the western media are wearing hijab. This is not my reality, nor has it been the reality of many Iraqi women, both within and outside Iraq, who do not wear the veil and who believe in the right of women to refuse to wear the veil. Women from fundamentalist Islamic families or tribes simply have no choice but to 'cover'. But the many educated, professional women in Iraq had chosen not to cover themselves. Clearly times have changed.

It is essential that westerners do not feel distanced from Iraqi women because they appear to be so 'different', presented as they are in their hijab. They are no different in their need and desire for human rights as any other women. They have faced obstacles historically and the situation is, if anything, more grave now, in the post-war chaos.

Sharia Law: The Root of the Problem

Women in both northern and southern Iraq have suffered years of institutionalized oppression. This oppression has arisen from the adoption of Sharia law in both regions. Despite the notion that Iraq had a 'secular' state, the concept of 'personal status law' which governed it, was based on Sharia. Iraqi women were among the most educated women in the Middle East, and were able to enter the professions. Nevertheless the laws, based on the Sharia, discriminated against them, and even the professional women of the south were far from equal with men.

Northern Iraq: No 'Autonomy' for Kurdish Women

Northern Iraq has been considered to be a 'Kurdish autonomous' area since the Kurdish uprising of 1991 removed it from the authority of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party. In reality the 'autonomy' of Kurdish people refers to its governance by two major nationalist parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP). These two parties are tribal in origin and their power is practised through tribal mores and networks, and therefore traditions which are Islamic in origin. This has strengthened, rather than weakened, the continuation of primitive notions of women's subordination. The nationalist parties are more concerned with inter-political struggles than provision of protection or rights for the Kurdish people as a whole and the rights of Kurdish women are not on their agenda at all. The same Sharia law relating to females that was practised by the Ba'ath Party of Saddam Hussein has been seamlessly co-opted into the governance of the Kurdish autonomous region. Intimidation and violence against women abound, and 'honour' killings, legal according to the Sharia, are commonplace in practice, despite amendments to the law by Kurdish authorities under pressure from women's

groups at home and abroad.

After the 1991 uprising in northern Iraq, women's rights organizations set up centres and refuges for women to protect them and help them defend their rights. These quickly came under attack by the PUK and were shut down with the excuse that they were 'immoral' institutions that did not comply with Kurdish traditions.

Southern Iraq: Professional but Not Equal

In southern Iraq the situation has not been very different. Women are educated and participate as professionals, but the brutality of Saddam Hussein's oppressive regime has affected their progress and they have had no independent organizations to raise their awareness and defend their rights. In October 2000 more than 200 women were accused of being prostitutes and publicly beheaded. This was a political campaign by the regime to intimidate the population generally, but it also provoked and authorized the brutal slaughter of women who were actually victims of the economic sanctions imposed by America and its allies from 1991. The sanctions caused starvation and disease, and the provision of basic human needs such as food and shelter for their families became the prime concern for many.

Conditions in Post-War Iraq

So where are the unveiled women? Secular Iraqi women now find their rights under greater threat than before. America's 'war against terrorism' has led both to the creation of more terrorists and to the increase in power of fundamentalist movements that oppose what freedoms Iraqi women still possess. Such groups have exploited the chaotic situation after the war to create an atmosphere of intimidation. Fatwas have been issued exhorting the crowd to throw tomatoes and eggs at any women – even Christian women – who appear outside unveiled. Professional women are finding themselves effectively banned from education, work, or even going shopping unless they wear hijab. Islamic leaders, both Shi'ite and Sunni, have acquired a firmer grip on Iraqi society. For women, that means greater terror and enslavement.

None of the likely future rulers of Iraq – chosen and supported by the American Bush administration – make a single reference to women's rights in their political programmes. Each has a long established agenda of opposing women's liberation and will continue to oppose any real advances. If the situation continues, Iraqi women will be pushed back into their homes, possibly with the exception of a few token women representatives in the interim administration. That will hardly constitute absolute and unconditional equality. The achievement of women's rights should happen from the grass roots: through the explicit abolition of all kinds of discriminative laws and the establishment of a secular state by the Iraqis themselves.

Houzan Mahmoud is Editor of EQUAL RIGHTS NOW!
houzan73@yahoo.co.uk

Islamization in Bangladesh

by *Fatemolla*

Bangladesh emerged as a paragon of religious harmony in 1971 after a bloody battle with the Pakistani occupying army, which was guilty of massive genocide and rape. But after the continuous failures of consecutive, corrupt secular democratic governments over the last three decades, people became increasingly desperate for an alternative. The *Jamaat-i-Islami*, (the main Islamic political party, which had joined the Pakistani army in 1971 in killing and raping their own people), came forward to fill the gap, with their proposition of establishing a Sharia-based Islamic state. Today, Bangladesh, a country of 130 million people, of which 86% are Muslims, is proceeding rapidly towards Islamization. *Jamaat* and other Islamist elements effectively implemented several carefully prepared plans, including the following:

1. Thousands of their supporters are absorbed into the civil service and the Defense Force through a separate education system in 60,000 Islamic schools (madrasas), many of which are privately funded and offer free food and boarding. In most of these madrasas, the national anthem is never sung.
2. They have their own student wing, newspapers and other media which they use effectively, exploiting people's religious sentiment to launch huge processions and to harass and torture freethinkers, journalists, writers, intellectuals, and any other opposition. With two ministers in the present parliament and thousands of suicidal followers, political Islam continuously hunts freethinkers by every means. Freedom of opinion is shrinking in Bangladesh.
3. They sent jihadi fighters to support the Taliban in Afghanistan, arranged arms training, smuggled firearms into the country and created training camps inside Bangladesh.
4. As political Islam does not recognize regional culture, it constantly attacks Bengali cultural activists and activities, and tries to implement so-called Islamic culture. It denies fine arts such as music, painting, dance and even the celebration of the New Year. Examples are the assaults on Taslima Nasrin and the planting of bombs in packed cultural gatherings and cinema halls. Muslims from other sects are also targets, and Ahmadi Muslims have been bombed in their mosques.

Perhaps the most serious and painful development in the Islamization of Bangladesh is reflected in the uncontrolled illegal, parallel judiciary system of instant summary Sharia courts that now hold sway in its villages. These summary courts dispense brutal and crude punishments, especially on women, for example burying waist-deep and stoning, beating with brooms and with shoes, shaving heads, flogging women and their parents, forcing them to walk with shoes around their neck, and so on. Performed as they are in the name of 'God's Law', people tend to deny these obvious cruelties. Here are some real cases:

18 May, 1993. Nurjahan of Faridpur district, accused of eloping with a man, was burnt to death.

10 January, 1993. The Sharia-court declared the divorce

letter of another Nurjahan, of Sylhet District, a fake and her new marriage invalid. The new couple was punished for adultery by being buried waist-deep and stoned; her parents were flogged 100 times. Nurjahan committed suicide next day.

6 March 2002. In Chandaikona, two raped sisters aged 10 and 12 years were each flogged 101 times by the Sharia court. At one point the elder sister lay on the ground unconscious. The rapist could not be identified.

30 June 2002. In Sirajganj, Jaygun Bibi was abducted and raped for 12 days. The Sharia court flogged her and the rapist 80 times.

Islamist influence in the villages impacts directly on women's economic freedom and democratic rights. Sharia courts have declared women divorced for taking jobs with non-governmental organizations and millions of women have been barred by Sharia from voting in elections.

Although Bangladesh has its own civil laws, certain Sharia laws are always observed such as women inheriting only half of any property, the right of men to have four wives, the right of men to divorce any wife and marry again to keep the number of wives at four at any time and restrictions on the right of women to divorce.

With each passing day Islamic law is steadily engulfing people's minds and behaviour in Bangladesh. There is hardly any effort to address the atrocities of Sharia by the government. Despite the fact that both head of state and leader of the main opposition political party are female, nothing has been done to improve the situation of the country's women. It is clear that these women leaders are as much representatives of patriarchy as their male colleagues.

Bangladesh is highly dependent on foreign aid. It seems that the only way to address the negative impact of the Islamization of Bangladesh is to put pressure on the Bangladeshi government through financial donor agencies such as the IMF, World Bank and donor countries.

fatemolla@hotmail.com



Editor's comment: A non-Muslim is beaten to death in Bangladesh in a random attack on the 'infidel'. Such attacks are frequently spawned by fervent Islamist sermons.

Enlightened Developments in Canada

At the request of Canadian Humanists, the Mayor of the City of Ottawa, Bob Chiarelli, issued the following proclamation recognizing 12 February 2003 as Darwin Day:

WHEREAS, Charles Darwin was born on February 12, 1809; and
 WHEREAS, from 1831–1836, he travelled in the southern hemisphere on the "HMS Beagle," officially as the captain's companion; and
 WHEREAS, his observations in natural history and on the adaptations of animals to their environments eventually led him to formulate his theory of evolution; and
 WHEREAS, he hypothesized that living things change over time, or evolve, in response to the selective pressures of their environment; and
 WHEREAS, the concept of evolution remains the unifying theory of biology.
 THEREFORE, I, Bob Chiarelli, Mayor of the City of Ottawa, do hereby proclaim February 12, 2003 as Darwin Day in the City of Ottawa.

Bob Chiarelli
 Mayor

In another encouraging move, on Tuesday, 10 June 2003, the three-judge panel of an Ontario Court of Appeal declared that gay couples have the legal right to marry in that province. The federal government of Canada considered appealing the Ontario decision before the Supreme Court. However, the Commons Justice Committee narrowly voted 9–8 against filing an appeal. In Canada, the federal government has the jurisdiction to make laws pertaining to marriages, while the provinces have the responsibility of administering these laws. Lower courts in other regions of the country have agreed with the Ontario court that refusing to allow gays and lesbians to marry violates the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Since the federal government's decision not to contest the court's ruling, at least two dozen same-sex couples have taken advantage of the decision to become legally married, many by Humanist officiants.

Sheila Ayala
 Senior Administrator, Humanist Association of Canada

Progress for Irish Humanists in Marriage Reform Proposals

An Inter-Departmental Committee (IDC) for Marriage Reform in the Irish Republic has issued a set of proposals which, if successfully implemented in legislation, will place Irish Humanist celebrants on an equal footing with clergy of all denominations.

The IDC was established because of a perception of inefficiency and inequality in the existing system. Churches were the only places recognized or licensed (outside of a handful of registry offices) to carry out legal weddings. The onus was then on the clergy to return the details for legal purposes to the state registrar and it was becoming clear that many failed to carry out their duties. On occasions this even led to bigamous marriages.

The state risked legal action for not properly supervising the system in the same way as they have been found liable for not supervising other institutions subcontracted out to the churches, such as orphanages. Also, only the major churches were recognized by law and followers of smaller ones had to apply for special licences and seek the use of premises from an approved church. With the influx and growth of new minorities including Muslims and Humanists the situation was becoming unmanageable.

The IDC proposed to deal with the problems in two stages. Phase one would improve record keeping, to be followed later by an effort to bring about more equitable treatment of minorities. They issued a suggested framework which proposed downgrading the record keeping and legal role of the clergy. All couples would register three months in advance and be issued with a licence which would need to be authorized by their marriage 'solemnizer', confirming that the ceremony had taken place; the couple would themselves then be responsible for returning the authorized licence to the

registrar before a marriage certificate was issued.

The Association of Irish Humanists (www.Irish-Humanists.org) welcomed this shift of responsibility from church to state and suggested that it cleared the way for a simple solution to the problem of equity of treatment: with decentralized record keeping no longer necessary it should now be possible to license the solemnizer rather than the premises. We could therefore see no reason why the various minorities should not nominate marriage solemnizers who could then be licensed by the state.

Within a matter of weeks the IDC issued proposals putting forward just such a solution and they were widely welcomed. The reform is now proceeding to the drafting of legislation. In seeking phrasing to cover minorities including Humanists (it is apparently inappropriate to mention specific organizations like the Humanists in a bill) we found ourselves grateful for the inclusion of 'ethical' in the IHEU title. The problem was to define categories of bodies which could apply to have solemnizers registered with the state in such a way as to avoid commercial opportunists or groups which might undermine the solemnity and status of marriage. The wording is not final yet but the stated 'ethical' dimension of organized Humanism seems to have won favour with those drafting the bill, with the likely wording for bodies nominating solemnizers being 'not-for-profit religious and secular ethical associations'.

We in the Association of Irish Humanists are delighted with the proposed reforms which, if implemented, will take our republic from an unfairly restrictive position to the forefront of European states in this legislative area.

Dick Spicer
 Ceremonial Director, Association of Irish Humanists

Slovakia: the Trojan Horse in the Future Unified Europe?

by Alexander Reháč and Miloslav Ambrus

The December/January 2001 issue of *International Humanist News* contained a statement from IHEU denouncing the situation of non-denominational citizens and Humanists in Slovakia, asking the national and international bodies to rectify such neglect of fundamental human rights before the accession of Slovakia to the European Union. The statement was also published on the IHEU website and received considerable supporting feedback.

In the past two years, the situation, far from improving, has worsened to an unprecedented level. The neglect of the 13–16% of the population with no religious adherence is, however, minor compared to the overall strategy of the regime, apparent in the legislative steps implemented and the statements of representative politicians. This strategy amounts to enshrining religion in the legal system.

Laws Regulating Relations Between State and Church

The laws initially passed in the former Czechoslovak Republic, and subsequently in the Slovak Republic following the overthrow of the communist regime in November 1989 were unequivocally directed at transforming the state into a truly democratic civil society. Yet this goal was soon compromised. In July 1991, a law concerning freedom of religion and the status of churches and religious communities was passed in the Czechoslovak Federal Republic (CSFR) which ignored the existence of non-denominational citizens in the population. In March 1992, another law concerning registering churches and religious communities in the newly formed Slovak Republic included the condition that new churches can only be registered with a petition of at least 20,000 signatures by citizens permanently resident in Slovakia. The intention was clear: to secure the dominant position of Catholicism in the state. The Catholic Church has also gained considerably financially and in terms of real-estate through the restitution law of 1993.

The state supports the Catholic Church morally and institutionally, and the Church is the recipient of a large proportion of the budget earmarked for developing the national culture. With such support, and the propaganda emanating from the mass media, non-believers, especially in rural areas, find themselves intimidated. This may explain the statistical (though not necessarily real) increase in those declaring themselves religious in the 1999 census. Such trends have only served to increase the confidence of the religious political lobby.

Concordat with the Holy See

A second landmark on the route to a religious state was the Concordat with the Holy See ratified by the Slovak parliament without opposition. The Concordat contains provisions constraining substantially the democratic principles of the Slovak legal system. Some articles formulate the right of the Catholic Church to enforce the rules of Canonical law on all Slovak citizens, irrespective of their own position on religion. Most notably, Article 7 states: "The Slovak Republic acknowledges the right of everyone to carry out his/her stipulations of conscience in accordance with the teachings of creed and moral

principles of the Catholic Church. The extent and conditions of implementing that right will be declared in a special international treaty concluded between the contracting parties." The draft of this international treaty has now been made available and has provoked some reaction despite the overall growing apathy. It covers the following sectors of public life: (a) activities in the armed forces; (b) health services (abortions, contraception, experimentation with manipulating human organs and embryos and with reproductive cells, cloning and euthanasia); education (the right to refuse to teach matters which are not consistent with Catholicism, despite the officially approved curricula); (d) lawsuit verdicts made by the judge at courts of justice (refusal of divorces, etc.). In all these cases, the citizen can refuse his or her participation without bearing legal responsibility by claiming stipulation of conscience, as declared by the Catholic Church.

Special Legal Supports for Slovakia's Deviation from the European Norm

In January 2002, the Slovak Parliament passed a 'Declaration about the sovereignty of the Slovak State in cultural and ethical issues'. It was immediately evident that this declaration stipulates preserving 'Christian values and ethical tenets', a point later confirmed by the Interior Minister, V. Palko. He also disclosed that similar declarations are under consideration in Poland and the Czech Republic. Is this a conspiracy by the candidate countries against pluralist and civil society that the EU is prepared to overrule?

In mid 2002, the Slovak Parliament discussed a new anti-discrimination law, one of the conditions to be fulfilled in order to bring the Slovak legal system into line with those of EU countries. Besides prohibiting discrimination against various philosophical life stances, the draft included a ban on discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The draft was swept off the agenda by MPs of the Christian Democratic Party, who argued that Christian morals do not allow the passing of such a law. Clearly, in its present form, the Slovak Parliament does not make decisions based on fundamental human rights, but rather only those that do not contradict the dogma of the church.

Why should we draw attention to this situation in the official bulletin of the international Humanist movement? Because it is no local problem for Slovak Humanists only. After its accession to the EU, the Slovakian situation would threaten the democratic and pluralist principles of the whole community. It would erode these principles from within, and seek to bring other nations back to the sheep-pen of the Holy See. Slovakia's problems are imminent problems for all European Humanists too. Humanist organizations in the member states should approach their governments demanding strict observance of human rights and the securing by legal measures of equal status for non-denominational citizens in countries aspiring accession to the EU.

Alexander Reháč and Miloslav Ambrus are members of the Prometheus Society of Slovakia.

Defending Press Freedom and Objectivity

World Press Freedom Day, which was observed on Friday, 2 May, began on a sombre note: participants were asked to observe a minute's silence in tribute to the 14 journalists who died covering the Iraqi war. Two others are still missing. Not all such deaths are the accidental results of the chaos in armed conflict. Worldwide, most journalists who die are specifically targeted for exposing corruption and crime. By the end of 2002, 136 were imprisoned, with hundreds more facing physical assault.

Louise Frechette, Under-Secretary General, spoke of the difficulty of the journalist's task. Their influence means they carry enormous responsibilities. Press freedom is a fundamental human right. Freedom of speech is protected and maintained by Article 19 of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Journalists constantly face difficult choices and challenges, such as maintaining objectivity rather than spreading propaganda or overlooking a situation rather than creating a single dramatic image. Journalists can tell us how war impacts on people. Of all casualties, 70% are civilians, and 66% are women and children.

A varied panel of correspondents, including reporters from CNN and Al Jazeera and Tony Jenkins, President of the UN Correspondents Association, spoke on the topic of The Media and Armed Conflict. A French journalist commented that many wars with great loss of life go almost totally unreported, for example those in Somalia and the Congo.

Television in particular came in for sharp criticism. The concept of 'embedding' reporters in military units under prescribed limitations of information creates loyalty to the

group, which limits objectivity of news, with no opportunity for an overall view. On American television, the media had become entranced by graphics and dazzling technology, presenting the Iraq war as though it were a video game. News has become entertainment. The present trend in American media is to further consolidation under conditions of corporate ownership, reducing the independence of individual voices.

The panelists were unusually outspoken in their condemnation of American TV coverage. They regretted that the Iraqi correspondent at the UN, Mohammed Assad Allawi, was accused of being a spy, but was not permitted to see the evidence against him or to use his legal right to protest. Tony Jenkins observed that the Anglo-American campaign had not proved that Saddam Hussein was involved in 9/11. No other nations believed in this threat. Jenkins observed that in press conferences American reporters did not pursue questions about motives for the war.

Although the tone of the meeting was unusually outspoken and critical, some journalists had been able to create live coverage by interviewing the Kurdish population. The CNN reporter complained of limited access but felt the press may have learned a lesson from the experience of 'embedding'. As an example of in-depth coverage, tribute was paid to an Israeli journalist, Amira Hass, who has lived among the Palestinian population and reported on conditions there. This was seen as a rare example of free access and long-term reporting on the conditions of a population.

The UN After Iraq

In the aftermath of the military victory in Iraq, the political battle between the UN and the Bush administration continues. The UN is facing a major challenge as a peacemaking institution. American officials have emphasized that the US and British military would play the leading role in setting up an Iraqi government. The UN's role would be limited to humanitarian activities coordinating food, medicine, and other relief supplies.

The French and other European diplomats have insisted that the UN play a more central role. Kofi Annan has stressed the experience of the UN in nation building, and the vital element of legitimacy that UN involvement would bring to the task. An administration installed by the US, if perceived as a puppet regime, would only further alienate many Arab and European countries. Internal rivalries among different religions and tribal groups in Iraq are certain to present great difficulties. The impartial stance of the UN would be helpful in creating a viable administrative body that will serve the Iraqi people as a whole, helping Iraqis to keep control of their natural resources. In terms of American efforts at rebuilding, Afghanistan does not present a happy precedent.

In the panel discussing the future role of the UN, many disturbing questions were raised. Will the effect of the war on the Arab world, and most specifically the war's aftermath, be conducive to peace and the building

of democratic regimes? Or will it produce more hatred, more suicide tactics, and ever more bitter resentment of American domination?

The UN's active political body is the Security Council. In the words of the Ambassador from Singapore, the Security Council is a moving target because the composition of the members constantly changes. Critics of the Security Council ask, "How can we wake it up?" The Ambassador from Singapore has answered, "It is impossible to wake someone pretending to be asleep." Nevertheless, the internationalization of problems travelling across borders is forcing nation-states to begin to recognize that their self interest lies in coping through negotiated cooperation. At present, this seems to be in opposition to America's political goals.

Sashi Tharoor, Undersecretary General For Communications says, "We've been here before when the Security Council was hamstrung by disagreement among the great powers, all accompanied by dire predictions about the body's future. We know it would be premature to write our obituary." In a session with the Values Caucus, Tharoor remarked that life in the UN is a constant balance between idealism and realism.

Sylvain and Phyllis Ehrenfeld are respectively IHEU representative and AEU's National Service Conference representative at the UN. These are adapted, edited versions of the full reports, which are available at www.ihcu.org.

Humanism at the Airport!

When I first travelled to Brussels by air to attend the IHEU World Congress in 1992, I was amazed to see a prominently displayed board outside the office of a 'Humanist Counsellor' in the Brussels International Airport, alongside places of worship for Jewish, Muslim and Christian believers. Any non-religious traveller wishing to seek counsel can go in and speak to the Humanist counsellor stationed there; or spend a while quietly meditating in the room.

Humanism is unmissable in the cultural and social landscape of the Benelux countries, and moral education and counselling services are the most practical way in which Humanism reaches the grassroots. Humanist counsellors and educators can be found in schools and in the military, as well as in hospitals. It may not be good news for fish, but it is amazing that in Belgium there is also a counselling service for fishermen!

Being so prominently placed in an airport gives significant visibility for Humanism to travellers coming from all over the world. Is it perhaps time for you to lobby your own city's airport to create space for Humanists if they offer facilities for religious people? Meanwhile, if you are a frequent air traveller, do take a stopover next time at Brussels Airport and meet up with Mr. Karl Laurent, the Humanist counsellor there! Or perhaps you wish to send a copy of your Humanist/Rationalist/Atheist/Freethinker magazine to be displayed, or made available in the Counsellor's office? I am sure that non-religious travellers from your country, speaking your language, will find it wonderful that such literature is available for consultation at an international airport!

Because, like luggage, mail can also sometimes disappear at airports, kindly post them to Mr. Karl Laurent at
P. Poppestraat 23, 2640 Mortsel, Belgium

Babu Gogineni

Empowering Women

IHEU International Women's Conference

Saturday November 15 2003 (10.00 am – 5.00 pm)
Sunday November 16 2003 (10.00 am – 1.00 pm)
at Conway Hall Library, Red Lion Square, London
Registration Fee £75 or €105 or US\$125 per person.

Keynote Speaker: Annie Laurie Gaylor

(Editor *Women Without Superstition – No Gods No Masters*,
and Co-Chair of *Feminist Caucus* of American Humanist Association)

How can Humanists promote and lobby for women's rights? How can the gender imbalance within the organized international Humanist movement be addressed? How can Humanism become more relevant to the women's movement?

IHEU recommends that all IHEU member organizations depute a representative to this important conference. Participants are expected from Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas! A limited number of travel scholarships and concessional registration fees will be available for speakers and participants from the Third World. For more details, or if you wish to speak at the conference, please send an email to women@iheu.org with full contact details.

An online conference leading up to the main conference is now being put in place.

Humanist Twinning

Our local Humanist group would very much like to link up with one or two groups abroad to exchange news and make new friends in the international Humanist community. We are particularly interested in linking up with Belgian Humanists, as we have one Belgian member, but would also like to hear from Humanist groups in the USA, Africa, India and South America.

If any group is interested in linking up with our UK Humanist group, please email David@DavidWarden.com

We would love to hear from you.

David Warden, Dorset Humanists

Support International Humanism Support IHEU

As an IHEU Supporter you help promote Humanism throughout the world. All supporters receive free copies of the IHEU *International Humanist News*.

IHEU Individual Supporter

Name: Mr/Ms
Address
.....
City/Country
Post Code
Tel (country & city codes)
Fax
Email

Languages spoken
Year of birth
Profession
Humanist Associations of which you are a member

I would like to support IHEU as:

- Annual Supporter (£30 or US \$50 payable January)
- Life Supporter (one-off £400 or US \$650 payment)
- IHEU Club 100 member (pledge to pay £340 or US \$500 each year for 3 years)
- Donation to IHEU's Endowment Fund (for securing IHEU's future)
- Donation to IHEU's campaigns (Rights of Humanists, Religion-State Separation issues)

Mode of payment:

- Cheque for £..... drawn in the name of: International Humanist and Ethical Union
- Transfer to IHEU Account No. 50958840. Barclays Bank (sort code 20-41-41), Holborn, London.
- Credit Card
MasterCard / Visa / Delta / Switch (delete as appropriate)

Card number
Expiry date
Cardholder's name
Signature

Date
(Please note that for international payments an international credit card may be the cheapest and most convenient way to pay. Transfers through banks may attract charges which may be high.)

Mail form/photocopy to IHEU,
1 Gower Street,
London WC1E 6HD, UK
Fax 00 44 20 7631 3171



In the name of honour and morality: see 'The Sharia and Women's Rights' inside.