

INTERNATIONAL HUMANIST NEWS

International Humanist and Ethical Union

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Untouchability: A Village Liberates Itself Plight of a Muslim Intellectual

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December 2006

IN THIS ISSUE

News	3
Divided Societies	
Sonja Eggericks	4
Untouchable	
Mulk Raj Anand	5
The Battle for Hearts and Minds	
Roy Brown	6
A Village Liberates Itself	
Venkata Reddy	8
Another Caste Hurdle Goes in Tamil Nadu	
Babu Gogineni	11
A Humanist Alternative for the Dalits	
Vidya Bhushan Rawat	12
Humanism through the Buddha	
V.B. Rawat	14
Community On Fire	
V.B. Rawat	15
The Buraku People of Japan	
Babu Gogineni	16
Untouchability in Nigeria	
Leo Igwe	18
Cagots of Bearn – The Pariah's of France	
Gerard de Silva	21
Religious Tolerance and Non-discrimination	
Matt Cherry	23
Mr. Bush's Respect for the Human Embryo	
Ana Lita	25
The Plight of a Muslim Intellectual	
Hasan Abbas	27
Radical Islam and Freedom of Expression in Europe	
Roy W Brown	30
Belgian Freethinkers at 35	33
For a Secular Europe	
Jenoff van Hulle	34
Critical Thinking for the World	36
Scandal in "God's Own Country"	
Babu Gogineni	37
UHESWO inaugurated in Kampala	40
Violation of Women's Rights in Uganda	40
In Defence of Secularism	42
Let us Open a New Front for Humanism	
Terje Emberland	43
IHEU condemns restrictions on freedom of expression at the UN	44
Joint Declaration of the Ligue de l'Enseignement and the Fédération Nationale de la Libre Pensée	45

Front cover: Scenes from Adavinathunikunta and Bynapalle villages. Clockwise from top left: Happy villagers after opening the village temple to all. Villagers gather to listen to speeches on equality. The village priest accepts offerings from a Dalit. Brahmins and Dalits sit together for lunch. Back Cover: Three leaders who will be sadly missed.

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

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From the Editor

Few people know that untouchability existed in Spain and in France just a few hundred years ago (see page 21). Today, despite her tainted past of colonialism, and the shameful responsibility for starting two world wars, Europe can boast of one of the most peaceful and egalitarian societies in the world. Untouchability has been so thoroughly eradicated there that few in Europe even know that it ever existed on the continent. There is no reason the same level of cultural development cannot be achieved elsewhere in the world where this terrible practice persists – in the Indian sub-continent (see page 8), in Japan (see page 16) and in Nigeria (see page 18). But before these societies can cherish the values of equality and establish true democracies, they need to first undergo the same kind of historical transformation that the Enlightenment made possible in Europe. Humanism, Human values and the flourishing of the scientific temper can help in the process of modernisation. It will be for the organized humanist movement to help make this happen, and IHEU has created the means to support international humanist activism (see page 6).

While being a haven of liberties, Europe is in danger of losing her hard-earned freedoms because of a confused approach to multiculturalism. Radical Islam has posed a genuine challenge to Europe, and unfortunately freedom of expression has been its first victim. The cancer has already spread to the UN (see page 44). Europe and her politicians have to wake up and urgently defend Europe's great achievements (see page 30).

In Nigeria (see page 42) and in Uganda (see page 40), Humanists are working hard to keep alive the human centered point of view. As International Humanism reaches out to francophone countries in Africa, new groups are being formed and new initiatives are being launched, like in Cameroon (see page 47). We must do all we can to support these groups, for the lamp they have lit is what will illuminate the path of progress for Africa.

Humanists reject God and organized religion, but they defend the freedom of religion or belief. This does not mean that Humanists can tolerate the egregious violation of the rights of women and minorities in the name of freedom of religion (see page 37 and page 40). Neither religion nor Humanism is exempt from the obligation to respect Human Rights. Indeed, it is this obligation which makes Humanists defend Human Rights at the UN (see page 23) or take up the cause of Dalits in India or of freethinkers in Islamic countries who are in a dire situation (see page 27). The threat to Humanism comes from many quarters – not just religion and we have therefore to expand the areas where we will fight for human freedoms (see page 43).

Unfortunately we are left with a heavy heart in the festive season. The departure of Saraswati Gora and Vern Bullough as well as the tragic train accident that led to Marius dees de Sterio's death leave us all in IHEU with a deep sense of personal loss.

Babu Gogineni

INVITATION FOR ARTICLES

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

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News

Dr. Onuoha, New Chair of Nigerian Humanist Movement

Eze Dr. Enyeribe Onuoha, traditional Head of the Umuchieze people has been elected Chair of the Nigerian Humanist Movement (NHM).

The erudite Dr. Onuoha, whose official title is His Royal Highness, was IHEU's invited-speaker from Nigeria at the World Humanist Congress in Paris. He started as a clergy man, but abandoned his Roman Catholic faith in favour of Humanism.

After his election as Chair of NHM, Dr. Onuoha declared that increasing the paid-membership of NHM, and getting NHM formal registration with the government were his top priorities. Plans announced by Dr. Onuoha also include production of a four-page monthly bulletin for all members and potential members. On-going campaigns being conducted by NHM (e.g against political assassination, female genital mutilation, caste discrimination based on circumstances of birth etc) will be strengthened. Attention will also be focussed on fund raising and on accounting for them in a clear and transparent way.



www.iheu.org

Over One Million Visitors in 12 Months!

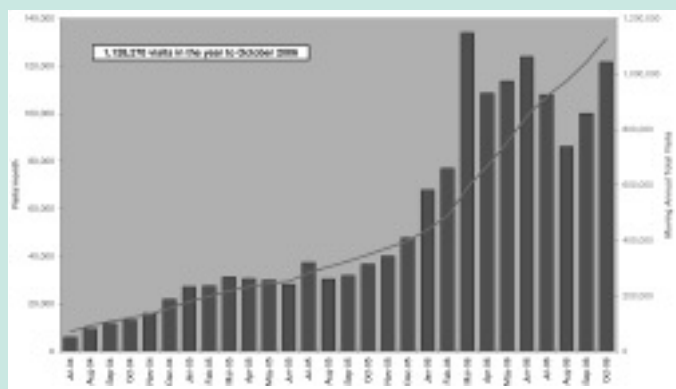
IHEU's website received over 1.1 million visitors in the last twelve months – and they viewed over 4.5 million pages between them!

The graph, and and IHEU's volunteer webmaster Jeremy Gibbs' face says it all!



IHEU's website is today the world's best resource on International Humanism with over 2000 documents in several languages, an efficient search function, regularly updated news items as well as several years of International Humanist News which can be downloaded as pdf files free of cost.

Thank you, Jeremy!



President's Column

Heed the Cry for Peace

The Middle East is once again the scene of bombings, and the theatre for the death of many civilians, including babies. The entire region is devastated by violence, and both sides are affected. Of course, this is a very complicated war, and we all know which side is right or wrong, depending on the side one has chosen! What is more: both sides have reasons to think they are right! Such certainty is common whenever there is a conflict, or even when there is serious disagreement over an issue. The real problem is that in this festering slow war in the region, both sides are convinced that they can solve the problem only by using bombs. The bombs are getting stronger by the day, the violence is getting more mindless, and the leaders are taking more hardline positions than ever.

It is indeed a mad world. While the bombing is going on, the leaders of the rich world are calmly examining the financial costs and efforts required to rebuild the region. Of course the most important question on their minds is who should be allowed to do it! They could instead concentrate their energies on stopping the destruction! Meanwhile, property continues to be destroyed, and irreplaceable human lives are being lost.

Of course, in the present atmosphere, I would be considered naive if I said that it would be better for the two sides to sit around a table and to try to solve the problem by diplomatic means. But there is no other alternative, and such a viewpoint may find support from the peace groups in Israel and in Lebanon, because they have understood that violence just breeds new violence. These groups are made of brave men and women who have dared say what they believe in, despite the war mongering that has been going on.

We must always dream of a better world – but we need not just dream about it, we could also act to make it better! Imagine a better world and think of the means to reach it! Getting rid of a mentality where war is seen as the way to solve conflicts would be the first step!

Divided Societies

The division of people into ranks and classes is probably as old as human society. Those who are familiar with Asterix comics have no doubt been amused that the village chief did not ever walk – he was carried on a shield! What that means of course is that he was thought more valuable than the others in his village. And those who were 'allowed' to carry the chief were obviously more valuable than those who were not strong enough to carry out this task – women and children for instance. It is true that the blundering shield-carriers in the story were comically incompetent – but the important thing for me is that such societies still exist in today's world – societies where hierarchies persist, defeating the notion of equality of all human beings. And this is not a

situation that can make one laugh. It puts us all to shame.

It is not so long ago that 'Apartheid' disappeared from South Africa. It takes time and effort to change the laws in a society, but to change people's mentalities takes even longer – and it is even harder. Black Africans were not seen as equal human beings during the apartheid regime, and even though they do have equal rights today, and even though there are black politicians in power, there is still a long way to go – for the black Africans have been victims for several generations.

In Asia, 200 million Dalits are struggling to survive each day. At least 170 million of them live in India. A Dalit is an outcast from society – in fact, a Dalit is completely out of the Hindu caste system. A Dalit is untouchable and is considered filthy. In many parts of the country, a Dalit is not treated like one would treat a human being. The situation is terrible in the small villages – the Dalits are not allowed to use the same water pump as the others in the village, and they are still condemned to do the dirtiest of jobs like scavenging and carrying night soil. On top of their miserable living conditions there is the violence that they have to endure silently. Every hour 2 Dalits are beaten, 3 Dalit women are raped and 2 Dalit houses are burned down.

Leaving the System

Some Dalits have tried to reclaim their human dignity – only with partial success – by 'leaving' Hinduism. They hoped to get rid of their untouchability by converting to Islam or Christianity. They were wrong of course, because the religions which they have embraced are not exactly the bastions of equality and freedom! And the ex-Hindus have continued to be Dalits in the eyes of the Hindus as well as in the new religions they have adopted. But, the law is on their side, and the Indian constitution forbids the practice of untouchability. What is more, the Indian government is committed to undo the cultural, educational, political and economic deprivation through positive discrimination. The least one can say is that this has not succeeded. There is resistance from the upper castes. Also, some Dalits have



"It is the duty of all our member organisations and supporters to bring the Dalit problem into the public sphere. Our representatives in the international bodies will focus international attention on the situation."

profited from the opportunities created by positive discrimination policies, but have forgotten their Dalit origins and have only attempted to corner the limited opportunities for personal benefit.

A Role for Organised Humanism

If religion – be it the one they left or the one that they have embraced – has failed to help, can Humanism perhaps be a better solution for their miserable problems?

I think so. And here, there is an important role for IHEU. Through our member organisations in India, we should campaign against this system which violates the most basic of human rights of a huge number of people. We should support and start projects for their empowerment and emancipation. IHEU's member organisations should help the Dalits organise themselves and make sure that their constitutional rights are not a myth anymore. Humanists have the duty to respect human rights, and they have the duty to enforce their application all over the world, irrespective of politics or

religion. It is not just in India – there are Dalits in other South Asian countries, especially Nepal, and also in Japan. And then there are untouchables in some African countries.

We will depend on our member organisations in the affected regions to initiate action. Much can be achieved through the existing legal framework. As a first step it is the duty of all our member organisations and supporters to bring the Dalit problem into the public sphere. Our representatives in the international bodies will be able to focus international attention on the situation of the Dalits. Where possible, we have to work together with other organisations which act in favour of the Dalits.

And we can make the shame of the system visible to as many people as possible. It is a disgrace that we live in the 21st century with such advanced science and technology, while millions are treated worse than one could even imagine. It is possible for all of us to make a difference, and Humanism can show the way.

Sonja Eggerickx

Untouchable

The temple stood challengingly before him. .. now he was afraid. The temple seemed to advance towards him like a monster, and to envelop him. He hesitated for a while. Then his will strengthened. With a sudden onslaught he had captured five steps of the fifteen that led to the door of the temple ... his hands joined unconsciously, and his head hung in the worship of the unknown god.

But a cry disturbed him, 'Polluted, polluted, polluted.' A shout rang through the air. He was completely unnerved. His eyes were covered with darkness. He couldn't see anything. His tongue and throat were parched. He wanted to utter a cry, a cry of fear, but his voice failed him. He opened his mouth wide to speak. It was no use. Beads of sweat covered his forehead. He tried to raise himself from the awkward attitude of prostration, but his limbs had no strength left in them.

"Polluted, polluted, polluted!" shouted the Brahmin below. The crowd above him took the cue and shouted after him, waving their hands, some in fear, others in anger, but all in a terrible orgy of excitement. One of the crowd struck out an individual note.

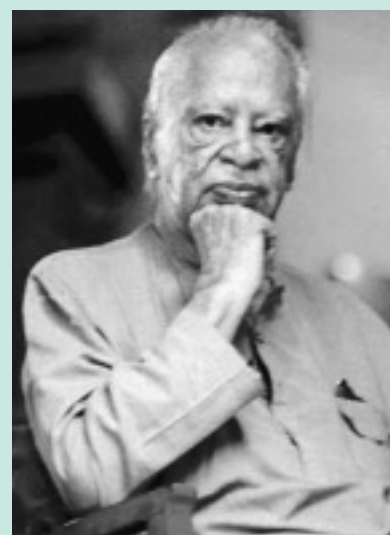
'Get off the steps, you scavenger! Off with you! You have defiled our whole service! You have defiled our temple! Now you will have to pay for the purificatory ceremony. Get down, get away, you dog!'



'You people have only been polluted from a distance' Bakha heard the little priest shriek. 'I have been defiled by contact.'

'The distance, the distance!' the worshippers from the top of the steps were shouting. 'A temple can be polluted according to the Holy Books by a low-caste man coming within sixty-nine yards of it, and here he was actually on the steps, at the door. We are ruined.'

Extracts from the late Mulk Raj Anand (1905 - 2004)'s 1935 novel Untouchable. One of India's celebrated novelists and a Humanist, Anand wrote this novel about one single day in the life of Bakha, a toilet cleaner who unintentionally bumps into an upper caste person.



The Battle for Hearts and Minds

Roy Brown

Why God is winning

9/11 marked a watershed in the global landscape. The changes that have taken place in the political climate worldwide since then are both dangerous and deeply troubling for justice, freedom and democracy. I am not speaking merely of terrorism and the responses to terrorism, but of the world-wide ascendancy of organised, politicised religion – from the United States and Europe to the Islamic world. God is back – and with a vengeance.

The July/August edition of *Foreign Policy* carried an article by Timothy Samuel Shah and Monica Duffy Toft entitled “Why God is Winning”:

“God is on a winning streak. It was reflected in the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Shia revival and religious strife in postwar Iraq, and Hamas’s recent victory in Palestine. But not all the thunderbolts have been hurled by Allah. The struggle against apartheid in South Africa in the 1980s and early 1990s was strengthened by prominent Christian leaders such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Hindu nationalists in India stunned the international community when they unseated India’s ruling party in 1998 and then tested nuclear weapons. American evangelicals continue to surprise the U.S. foreign-policy establishment with their activism and influence [...] Indeed, evangelicals have emerged as such a powerful force that religion was a stronger predictor of vote choice in the 2004 U.S. presidential election than was gender, age, or class.”

But while Shah and Toft’s analysis is undoubtedly correct, their conclusion – that increasing democracy means that the desire of people for more religion is finally being heard – is entirely wrong. What we are seeing is no simple manifestation of people power. It is the direct result of the billions of dollars being invested in the promotion of ultra-conservative agendas by the Christian Right, radical Islamists and Hindu nationalists. The messages of authoritarian, theocratic conservatism are often the only messages voters hear in a rapidly changing and often frightening world.

How can Humanists respond?

How can the Humanist community respond? It is surely no longer enough to wring our hands and write articles about the ignorance and corruption of governments. In order to fight the forces of theocracy we must strive to win the hearts and minds of people everywhere – the poor and oppressed and those overexposed to religious and political propaganda.

However beleaguered we Humanists, Rationalists and Secularists in the West may feel, our problems are minor compared to those of the developing world. I have written in the past of the evil nexus of politics and religion now dominant in India, Africa and the Islamic world. Superficially the situation in India and Iran may seem

“We must fight. Every penny spent on developing rational thinking and aid programs without strings is a blow for Humanism, Rationalism and for the future of humanity itself.”



worlds apart, but scratch the surface and the similarities are obvious: a political class that has discovered the mind-control possibilities of religious extremism: whether Islamic, Christian, Hindu or even Buddhist; and religious leaders who see alliances with political power as the route to increasing their wealth and influence. The tragedy for millions of the poorest people in Africa is compounded by the pastors, priests and prophets selling spells and salvation in return for the widow’s mite and by religious dogma inhibiting effective action to stop the spread of AIDS.

How IHEU is responding

The annual strategy meeting of the IHEU Executive Committee in Marthas Vineyard last September marked a turning point in IHEU’s approach to these problems. For the first time, the EC agreed that the promotion of Humanism in developing countries is to be our most urgent priority. The first important step in this new strategy, with symbolic as well as practical significance, was for Babu Gogineni, based in London for the past nine years as IHEU Executive Director, to move to India. Babu has relocated to Hyderabad from where he now has direct responsibility for the growth and development of Humanism in South Asia and Africa, and is already making an important contribution to the struggle against untouchability. In April this year he inaugurated the first ever untouchability-free village in the state of Andhra Pradesh. In June he made successful trips to Africa, to strengthen support for the African Humanist Alliance and the Ugandan and Nigerian Humanist Associations.

Our purpose in India is not to bring Humanism to the sub-continent. It is to act as a catalyst to help bring Indian Humanism, with its long and honourable history of individual dignity, autonomy and social justice into the Indian mainstream. Modern Indian Humanism can be traced to the first half of the 20th Century and the struggles of great leaders such as M.N. Roy, Periyar and Gora against British rule and the caste system. Their legacy provides a strong base on which to build. No single Humanist organisation on its own can achieve this unaided, and IHEU has few resources of its own. We can however help to promote collaboration among our

member organisations. By focussing on major issues common to many Indian Humanists, we can assist in the co-ordination of nation-wide activities, in the development of common projects and programs, and as a means of communicating good ideas and best practices among our members. With 19 member organisations now in India, the scope for collaboration is enormous, while remembering that each organisation has its own priorities and focus and that India is not a country but a continent with a myriad of different cultures, languages and histories.

We can also serve as a channel of communication, bringing worthwhile projects to the attention of our richer, Western member organisations. In this connection we can do much to assist our African colleagues in helping build their own, relatively new organisations. Modern African Humanism has a shorter history than Indian Humanism and can be traced to western influence and leaders such as Tai Solarin in the second half of the 20th century. Our African member organisations are relatively young, financially weak and under-resourced and face the dual threats of rampant homophobic, intolerant, superstition-driven evangelical Christianity, and militant Islam, unprepared to compromise on its dark and intolerant vision for the world.

In Africa the needs of our nascent member organisations are so pressing that we shall try to raise funds directly from individual members in support of specific projects such as small Humanist schools, and Humanist-run, small-scale social programs. We shall also attempt to provide guidance to our smaller member organisations on the importance of feedback, financial transparency and progress-reporting as a necessary step in obtaining future and increased funding.

Increased funding

IHEU has obtained increased funding for the next three years from HIVOS, the Dutch Humanist Development Agency for which thanks are due to both HIVOS and Babu Gogineni for his efforts. The IHEU website has details of how member organisations can apply for project funding of up to a few thousand dollars. All applications will be reviewed, and grants allocated by the new IHEU Grants Committee.



Humanism must put a smile on every face. It can

Some of our American and European member organisations are also providing direct support for African and Asian member organisations and their projects. But the total amount of funding from all Humanist sources is at present but a trickle in the desert compared to the overwhelming need. It is therefore vital that the support we provide be focused both on the greatest need and where it can be most cost-effective.

How every Humanist can help

The Growth and Development Committee will play a role in pre-evaluating projects, helping with their presentation and appealing directly to members for support via the IHEU website, and in emergency situations only, via e-newsletters to members. We appeal to every member who has some disposable income to support these projects. UK tax-payers can take advantage of the government gift-aid scheme to obtain a tax rebate on their donations by making an ear-marked donation via the International Humanist Trust.

We must fight. Every penny spent on developing rational thinking and aid programs without strings is a blow for Humanism, Rationalism and for the future of humanity itself.

Our backs are to the wall. Our partners in the developing world need every penny we can spare. We now have in place the mechanism that makes it easy for you to help. I appeal to you to use it.

Give Currency to Humanism!

IHEU has embarked on the vital task of promoting Humanism in South Asia and in Africa where Humanism, human values and science are most urgently needed. IHEU will strengthen its member organisations in these regions, and raise funds for humanist projects.

IHEU needs the funds to make this a grand success. You can help by becoming a paid-up supporter of IHEU. (See page 47 for different categories of support).

Please send your form to the office in London, or e mail president@iheu.org. You may also pay securely via IHEU's website using a credit or a debit card.

IHEU has not-for-profit 501 (c) 3 status in the US. IHEU also works closely with the International Humanist Trust which has charitable status in the UK.

Remembering IHEU and IHEU's work in your will means that you leave behind a lasting legacy of revitalised International Humanism.

A Village Liberates itself

Venkata Reddy

The Scene of Action

The twin villages of Adavinathunikunta and Bynapalle are situated in Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh, South India. It is a region that receives scanty rain fall, despite the pleasant temperatures throughout the year. Punganur is the closest town; Madanapalle, famous as the birth place of the mystic philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurthy, as well as the hill resort of Horsely Hills are nearby. We are just two-and-a-half hours away by road from Bangalore, the hi-tech capital of India, but unfortunately, very far from the social and technological advances that urban India has made since independence nearly 60 years ago.

This is the story of our on-going experiment to use rationalism as a tool to modernize the people of the region. This is also an account of the difficulties and dilemmas that we have faced as Humanists, in our attempt to spread scientific temper and inculcate human values.

Around 1000 people live in these two villages. About 500 would be from the upper castes, some 400 are from the so-called backward castes, and nearly 80 are from the Dalit community, or the traditionally untouchable castes. The Dalit community consists of the Malas and the even more downtrodden Madigas. Here, like in most other villages, the Malas themselves used to consider the Madigas untouchable!

The democratic Panchayat system of local self-government exists in Indian villages, and these two villages, along with 5 other neighbouring ones form the Raganipalle Panchayat, covering over 3000 inhabitants. Several such Panchayats fall under the jurisdiction of Punganur mandal. A mandal is an administrative unit – Andhra Pradesh state with its 90 million population has 23 administrative districts, in turn made of 1123 Mandals.

The Story of Our Village Well

Following India's independence in 1947, the Government of India initiated a programme of masonry well digging so that Dalits could have easy access to drinking water. The well that was dug in 1950 in my native village, Adavinathunikunta, provided surprisingly tasty water – but sadly proved to be a bane for the Dalits. The upper caste people in the village summoned the Dalits and informed them that they wanted access to the new well. Since it was impossible for the upper castes to share the well with the Dalits, the Dalits would have to cede ownership. As a concession, a parapet wall would be built – and the Dalits would be allowed to stand behind the wall and receive water poured to them. Of course, this arrangement imposed on the Dalits had no legal sanction – indeed it was a punishable offence!

This was still the situation in 1969 when I, then a young lecturer in English at the Sri Krishna Devaraya University, and a fellow villager, B.V.Ramana, a post-graduate student, decided to do something about it. We

“We want to liberate all in society – both the upper castes from their oppressive arrogance and the lower castes, from their economic, social and cultural misery”.

wanted to chase untouchability in our village, help widen village streets and improve sanitation, as well as start a village library. In that Centenary year of Gandhi's birth, it would be our tribute to a great man, we thought.

We organized a meeting in the village where the local Member of the State Legislative Assembly was invited. My friend, Mr. Muni Venkatappa, an officer of the

Indian Administrative Service (and a Dalit himself) from a nearby village, Laddigam, was also present when the well was declared open to all sections of the village. This was welcomed by the Dalits, of course, and happily there were no protests from the upper castes. However, after the meeting, and when the public officials had left, the leaders of the upper castes insisted that the new arrangement would be acceptable to them only if the Malas acknowledged the right of the Madigas also to use the well. Their confidence was that the Malas and the Madigas would not be able to agree on this and that the status quo could be maintained. This was an unexpected challenge for us. We consulted with the Dalit community leaders and called for a meeting. After considerable discussion and a lot of education, the two communities agreed that there would be no internal untouchability amongst the Dalit families. Both the communities began to draw water from the well.

When this good news was announced to the rest of the village, instead of keeping their promise, the upper castes immediately reverted to the old well which they had abandoned in 1950 because of the salty water. Apart from the Dalits, only the Muslims now used the well. From amongst the so-called upper caste families, only my mother, a believer as well as an illiterate, continued to draw water from the well. She was heckled by the rest of the upper caste people, because the water was fit only for animals, now that it was defiled by the Dalits. It took over ten years for the Brahmins in the village to overcome their prejudice and to end their boycott of the well. Finally, the village priest Narayanaswamy and his family too came back to the well.

Not everywhere are the Dalits that lucky. Mr. Muni Venkatappa was a high ranking government officer till his retirement a few years ago, and yet, the upper caste people in his village still avoid a shortcut path in the village because it passes by his home and because he is a Dalit.

Involving the Community

Several years later, as a Professor at the university, I had the opportunity to lead a team of 35 students to Lakkunta village. For 15 days we all stayed in the Dalitwada – or the Dalit colony. It could hardly be called a human habitation, and it was located away from the rest of the village. There, living amongst the Dalits, we cooked for each other, and shared food and water, both as a measure to express our solidarity with fellow citizens, as well as to pass on a message to the upper

caste villagers. This was a trip that is remembered fondly by all the Dalits of the village and indeed of the region, for what this did to their self esteem. It was also a lifechanging experience for the students who after initial hesitation overcame their prejudices and became committed to social change.

I retired from the University in 1999, and went back to my native place with the sole purpose of bringing about a social change in that backward area. By this time the Elementary school I went to in the village grew to be a 200 pupil Upper Primary school. My first attempt at making Adavinathunikunta, a modern village was to get a High school sanctioned so that everyone in the village will at least be a matriculate. We were also happy that computer mogul Ajim Premji's Wipro Foundation selected our village for free computer education.

However, despite all these welcome developments, and even if outwardly all seemed well, Adavinathunikunta still practised untouchability. Dalits were still not allowed into the village temple, and the villagers still did not eat together, even if the barber and the washerman community were no longer excluded from upper caste homes. This was the situation even in early 2006.

Dilemma for a Humanist

As a first step, the village temple had to be opened up to all who wished to go inside. Also, one of the biggest taboos in society relates to people's food and eating habits, and by encouraging everyone to share food we would drive out the last vestiges of untouchability in the village. How could I, a Humanist who has little time for God and for temples, work for opening the village temple to all? It was morally reprehensible that a place of worship is not open to all, and it was legally a crime. What I and my believer friends were doing was to make sure that those Dalits who wished to enter the village temple would not be denied access. It was not a question of promoting religion, but that of promoting equality in a deeply divided society.

The Ugadi (Telugu New Year Day) which fell on March 30th 2006, provided an opportunity for us to bring the high caste Hindus and Dalits together. We succeeded in our attempt to persuade the upper caste people to welcome the Dalits into their fold to celebrate Ugadi together but without the superstitious reading of the astrological almanac – the Panchangam! Mr. N. Venkata Reddy, a leading advocate and a popular political activist from the neighbouring village, Mallupalli, participated in the programme and encouraged the villagers to live in social harmony. About 70 youngsters from all castes (Brahmin and Dalit) came together to march in the village streets shouting slogans "All Humans are Equal!"; "Caste and Religious Differences should go!" and "Untouchability should be eliminated!" Happily enough, the village priest Narayana Swami himself ceremonially threw open the temple doors and welcomed two Dalits, Krishnamurthy and Narasimhulu, to conduct puja (prayers) in the sanctum sanctorum. My daughter, Sahana, prepared a huge pot of the traditional Ugadi *pachchadi* (with the legendary



And Now We are Equal!

six different tastes) which the Dalits distributed among all the homes in the village. What is more, the Brahmin Pujari himself took prasadam and Ugadi pachchadi from the Dalit who replaced him. Later high caste Hindus themselves entered Dalit homes and accepted prayer offerings.

Everyone in the village felt that this was a new beginning for them, for they were meeting each other as equals. It was a true liberation for both the upper castes and the lower castes, for they discovered and were publicly practicing the great humanist value of equality. For example, when some Dalits were rebuilding their homes, the powerful Reddy community welcomed them into their colony – something unthinkable in past years.

Very soon, we utilized the religious festival of Sri Rama Navami which took place on April 7th 2006, to further the cause of removal of untouchability in Bynapalli with the help and cooperation of Mr. C.Srinivasa Rao, a retired government lecturer in English – and a Brahmin by birth. We organized an interdining programme in front of his house. He came forward with his Brahmin friends to participate in the event. Brahmins, Upper Castes, Backward Castes and Dalits all sat and ate together in a moving display of brotherliness.

80 years after Periyar!

It is sad that after Periyar's successful temple entry programme of 1924, Dr. Ambedkar's temple entry campaign of 1930, Gandhi's opposition to untouchability, and Gora's interdining activities of the 1930s, the same activities have to be repeated some 80 years on, even if the social resistance is far less now.

By this time we felt confident enough to invite journalists – and all over the state news about this was widely broadcast. We were slowly becoming confident of what has been achieved, and our village was getting ready to announce to the world that we had finally buried untouchability in our community! It is true that untouchability is a crime anyway, but this was the first time that a village came together to formally and publicly state that they had eliminated the heinous practice.

It is morally reprehensible that a place of worship is not open to all. It is not a question of promoting religion, but that of promoting equality in a deeply divided society.

On 14 April which is the birthday of the great Dr. Ambedkar, we organized a meeting at Punganur Municipal office compound where some 800 Dalits attended from various villages to celebrate Adavinathunikunta's achievement. It was also the occasion for IHEU's Babu Gogineni – at whose suggestion and with whose help we had planned the events – to provide a Humanist perspective. The Humanist stand point was widely welcomed, and we have had many enquiries since about the Humanist stance.

Organising Themselves

Enthused by all these activities, some 40 youngsters in the village came together to organize themselves into a formal organisation called Pragati Yuvajana Sangham (Progressive Youth Association) so that they could continue this work. The youth group resolved to promote a rational outlook, and to fight untouchability wherever it may be found. They also resolved to support the anti-liquor movement so that the men do not waste their earnings on liquor and on gambling. When they went to formally register their organization with the local Registration office in Chittoor, the official demanded a bribe. They refused to pay.

In a democratic nation, change at the political level is very important. Sadly, Indian public life is a cesspool of corruption and caste politics. So when elections were to be held at the Panchayat level recently, we tried – unsuccessfully – to get a non partisan social worker from the backward castes elected. She was very poor but quite committed to social change. Unfortunately, the intimidatory tactics of the political parties made sure that the candidate that we were encouraging withdrew from the election.

Our Approach

Only education can guarantee emancipation. When young people are exposed to powerful modern ideas, and when they are trained to relate their knowledge to their conditions of life, the results can be very impressive. When the ability to think for themselves is developed amongst people and they are exposed to the right knowledge, superstition will find no home in their minds. We also organized in the summer this year training programmes which were aimed at providing some important skills to people from the backward castes – an event in which Babu Gogineni also participated.

Throughout, the methods we adopted were that of non-confrontation. After all, we live in a village where

The social movement must be Humanist in identity, and IHEU's involvement in our activities, and its commitment to our cause, has been most encouraging and valuable to us.

there is so much inter-dependence. Fighting with the entrenched forces in a violent manner would not help bring about a friendly and lasting transformation. We want to liberate all in society – both the upper castes from their oppressive arrogance and the lower castes, from their economic, social and cultural misery. The various acrimonious debates and violent confrontations elsewhere in Indian society were also cautionary examples to us. There is of course no one single approach to the problem, each situation will require a solution tailored to the specific circumstances.

Is our poor village liberated? Not entirely. But it is surely well on the way to quietly achieve some important cultural gains. Most importantly, the participants in the social change – both upper castes and lower castes – saw the need to organise themselves to continue their activities. The community has come to own and cherish the change that has been brought about. As is obvious, more needs to be done. Our village is yet to welcome true democracy and we are yet to develop rationalism as the dominant culture in the community. And yet, despite the fact that caste still remains, the villagers themselves set an example for others in the region. As important as what the villagers achieved, was to tell the world about it. Now many wish to replicate the experiment of Adavinathunikunta. The time is ripe as the people are more responsive. We will soon repeat the 14 April event in Punganur, this time with greater numbers and also by involving the district administration.

We want to give the Dalits a face and an identity, we want them to organize themselves. As Humanists, we want to be the catalysts for a social movement which will be driven by the beneficiaries of the change – for that we are planning on how to provide them Human Rights training and Humanist education. The social movement must also be Humanist in identity and we are establishing a Society for Social Change and Humanism which will apply for membership of IHEU. IHEU's involvement in our activities, and its commitment to making all this happen has been very encouraging to us – and most valuable.

Prof. Venkata Reddy is Honorary State President of the Jana Vigyana Vedika (a science popularization group) and President of the All India English Language Teachers Association.

The rapid progress true Science now makes, occasions my regretting sometimes that I was born too soon. It is impossible to imagine the height to which may be carried, in a thousand years, the power of man over matter. We may perhaps learn to deprive large masses of their gravity, and give them absolute levity, for the sake of easy transport. Agriculture may diminish its labour and double its produce; all diseases may by sure

means be prevented or cured, not excepting even that of old age, and our lives lengthened at pleasure even beyond the antediluvian standard. O that moral science were in as fair a way of improvement, that men would cease to be wolves to one another, and that human beings would at length learn what they now improperly call humanity!

Benjamin Franklin's letter to Joseph Priestly, 8 Feb 1780

Another caste hurdle goes in Tamil Nadu Babu Gogineni

The recent abolition of the caste bar to priesthood in India will have far reaching consequences for the unequal social order that orthodox Hinduism promotes. Babu Gogineni looks at the implications.

Recent elections

The recent elections in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu were a curious spectacle of rival Dravidian parties trying to outbid each other in the unsustainable promises they were making to the electorate: free colour televisions, free computers, writing off of loans that farmers owed to Cooperative banks were only some of them. It was the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) which won the electoral first-past-the-post race through clever political alliances and intelligent exploiting of caste vote banks. Both the parties claim to be inheritors of the legacy of Tamil Nadu's rationalist movement of the early 1900s, but this is not entirely convincing: the outgoing government of All Indian Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) had the indignity of being led by a Chief Minister who visited temples, performed rituals as well as modified her name on the advice of astrologers and numerologists. Neither party has ever shied away from corruption or from nepotism.

Social Reform

However, obscured behind the circus of election campaigning was a manifesto promise of the DMK which went largely unnoticed, until immediately after the elections. The government decided that caste would no longer be a bar to a person wishing to become an *archaka* – a priest – in the state's Hindu temples. The government also abolished VIP treatment for politicians and other dignitaries at temples. The new Chief Minister, the octogenarian Karunanidhi, announced that by implementing its election manifesto promise of creating equality of opportunity "to all the trained persons from all castes to act as *archakas* in the temples" they were fulfilling one of the late Periyar E V Ramasamy's unfulfilled wishes. One of India's great rationalist icons, Periyar Ramaswamy is founder of Dravidar Kazhagam – the Dravidian Self Respect Movement – which is an IHEU member organisation. The state cabinet also decided to do away completely with VIP treatment for politicians and other dignitaries at temples.

Priesthood

As per orthodox Hindu traditions, priesthood is reserved for those who were born into the Brahmin caste; temples are reserved for those born in the upper castes, while temple entry itself is barred to the so-called untouchables – the Dalits. Of course, not everything in contemporary India fits with this stereotyped image of the caste system: discrimination against the Dalits is today a crime, several lower castes have empowered themselves thanks to education, and priesthood itself is in decline. Today's Brahmin priests in small temples live on subsistence wages and their children are desperate to move to other

"Equality is a moral value and Humanists should welcome its establishment by law. Rationalism will follow".

professions. Also, it should be noted that for several centuries several small temples have been employing non-Brahmins as priests and it should also be mentioned that not all temples bar entry to the Dalits. But major temples with their extraordinary riches have always been under the control of a powerful clique of Brahmins.

Previous Attempts

The present move by the government takes further a previous DMK government's 1970 amendment to the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Act aimed at ending discrimination on the basis of caste in a state where Brahmins form just 3.5% of the total population of 60 million.

It may also be mentioned that Tamil Nadu's progressive measure comes nearly 20 years after a similar law was passed in neighbouring Andhra Pradesh state. In Andhra Pradesh the then government formed by the Telugu Desam Party created a great furore by abolishing the centuries-old trusteeship rights of the 12 *Mirasi* priestly families of Tirumala Tirupati temple. The temple at Tirupati is the world's second richest religious body, ranking next only to the Vatican and the *Mirasi* families were entitled to a 21.6% share of the temple's earnings from sale of holy offerings (typically the share was equivalent to one million US dollars then)!

After a ten-year court battle with the government, the *Mirasi* families lost when the Indian Supreme Court confirmed that the legislature was competent to define qualifications for *archakas* and to conduct examinations for selecting priests as well as other temple workers. In another case, in 2002 the Supreme Court of India also held that all non-Brahmins including the so-called untouchables were eligible to function as temple priests if they were 'well-versed and properly trained' in temple rituals. The 2002 judgement also clarified that such appointments were not violative of Article 25 which guarantees the freedom of religion to all Hindus.

What next?

The impatient Humanist may desire that rather than be a priest in a Hindu temple, a Dalit or a lower caste Hindu should boycott Hindu religion itself altogether. But practically speaking one would say that to the extent that Hinduism is made to accept equality, to that extent this ancient religion would humanise itself. Humanists desire both equality and rationalism. Equality is a moral value and Humanists should welcome its establishment by law. Rationalism will follow.

It appears that the next step should be that women are also given an opportunity to become priests in a religion and a society which has subjected them to extreme discrimination.

The ultimate goal of a society based on Human Values is far away in a country where caste is playing a more active role in politics. But the steady march towards Humanism, aided by literacy, rights education and technological advances is slow but sure.

A Humanist Alternative for the Dalits *Vidya Bhushan Rawat*

The emancipation of Dalits started as an essentially Humanist movement, but as the movement grew politically, the Humanist element has been lost. It is high time the Humanist alternative be made available again to the Dalits, writes V.B. Rawat.

Dr. Ambedkar's Revolution

Through his writings on the Indian social structure, through his analysis and criticism of Hindu thought and mythology, and through the political mobilization of the masses around their problems, Dr. Ambedkar, himself a Dalit and also father of the Indian Constitution, inaugurated a social and political revolution in which the Dalits were active participants. Underlying this approach was Dr. Ambedkar's realization that political empowerment of the Dalits was possible only on the basis of a social revolution.

Dr. Ambedkar's sophisticated strategy put the Dalits on a course of personal liberation while at the same time mobilizing them as a community of victims. His strategy never ignored the individual: "Unlike the drop of water that merges its existence with the ocean in which it drops, man does not lose his entity in the society in which he lives. Man's life is independent. He is not born for the service of the society but for his self-development," he wrote. This is a Humanist approach, consonant with M.N. Roy's idea that "Freedom of society must be the totality of the freedom of individuals ... the doctrine that the individual should sacrifice for the benefit of welfare and progress of society is fallacious. That it is not a liberating but an enslaving doctrine."

Like the other backward castes that fought hard in the early 1900s, the Dalits too made impressive contributions to the spread of Humanistic values. Seeking the human dignity that was denied them for centuries by upper caste Hindus, they fought against the scriptures authored by the priestly class, and they defied the divinely ordained caste system. Both Dr. Ambedkar's approach and the movement that was inspired by him was essentially a Humanistic struggle.

The Revolution is Lost

Today this very Dalit revolution has reached an impasse because its character has changed. As Dalits become

Today's Dalit movement and its new leaders would rather consolidate caste identities than create a casteless society.

progressively involved in electoral politics, there is a steady move away from emphasis on individual emancipation. To mobilize people in electoral politics the leadership of the Dalits is emphasizing their caste identity – today's Dalit movement and its new leaders would rather consolidate caste identities than create a casteless society.

The important north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh is a case in point. Here, for the first time, Ms. Mayawati, a powerful Dalit woman became Chief Minister. Mayawati and her colleagues built a political movement under the leadership of the recently deceased astute political strategist Kanshi Ram. They mobilized the Dalits and the other backward castes, and fashioned them into a powerful and influential vote bank. And then they struck an alliance with the Hindu political party the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and came to power holding onto their coat tails. The leadership of the Dalits – including many intellectuals, applauded this development, but they did not stop to ask how Dalits could seek the support of a political party which represents the crass interests of the upper caste Hindus – and which was responsible for the genocide of 2000 Muslims in Gujarat state. At the same time as praising Dr. Ambedkar's explosive work 'Annihilation of Caste', they now seek an alliance with the casteist and political Hindus. Social development is not on their agenda, as it does not fetch you publicity. Through these opportunistic alliances and the loss of focus, the revolution has lost its moral character. They have ended up with an alliance with the oppressor, rather than create a Humanist alternative to the Hindu mindset!

Deepening Caste Identities

As the ideological fight has turned into an 'identity' struggle, Humanism and Human values do not necessarily inform it anymore. In Uttar-Pradesh, many Dalit activists have set up their own God men who are sucking the life blood of the community. Today, to many Dalits, a priest is bad only if he is a Brahmin by birth – but good if he is a Dalit. In Kushinagar where the Social Development Foundation works, I was aghast to see how the poor Mushahar (an untouchable community) women were being exploited by a local Tantrik who is also a Dalit (Dushadh). Many years ago, an ideologue of the Dalit movement asked me not to be too critical of Lord Rama as he was a 'Kurmi', a backward community person. I was not aware of this lineage of Lord Rama, since he is considered to be a Kshatriya. In anycase, my reaction was "So what if he was a Kurmi? His life does not inspire me!" Similarly, attempts are made to suggest that the Buddha was either a tribal or a Saakya. It is sad when you like the Buddha not for what he has said or done, but for what his caste was.

Once the egalitarian thrust is lost, the first victims are amongst the Dalit community which itself is made of different castes. The community of scavengers literally carries the burden of tradition by cleaning human



Dalits in North India mobilise to assert their rights

excreta manually and transporting night soil. Unfortunately, this community, called the Valmiki, feels alienated from the wider Dalit movement in India – as the lowest amongst the Dalits, they do not have the support of the rest of the Dalits – and hence they do not get a share of the benefits that accrue to the Dalit community despite the sudden spurt in the number of donor agencies and NGOs taking an interest in their plight.

We in the SDF have been involved in a struggle for reclamation of 1167 acres of land from a private company in Shaheed Uddham Singh Nagar. Some 150 Dalit families were tilling this land which had been declared ceiling surplus under the Land Ceiling Act which limits the amount of land one can hold in India. In 1990 the industrial house demolished the Dalit colony – and it took us 14 years to obtain a judgement in favour of the Dalits. We have seen how the victims have been used by a large number of human right organizations for political and other ends. Even Dalit groups have been guilty of this.

Getting it Right

Ambedkar condemned India's village system, terming it a 'den of feudalism, corruption and nepotism'. These words are as true they were in the past – yet many of the NGOs which are working to 'emancipate' the Dalits continue their glorification of India's past and of our village system. This is because many of these NGOs are religious and are driven by the religious value system. Also, religion, rather than the welfare of these people is their main agenda.

Religiosity dis-empowers the marginalized. The poor, marginalized communities are sandwiched between different Gods and their different followers. When we focused on the issue of Mushahars, a community of rat eaters who were dying of hunger and starvation, a few 'God-fearing' activists came over and asked me whether the community members wished to convert to another religion. My answer to them was that the first priority of the Mushahars was to get two meals a day.

While the problem is in, and with religion, the Dalit movement faces a grave danger from those religious groups which suggest that there is liberation through conversion to Christianity and to Islam. Conversion to either of these religions has not really helped them in their struggle for emancipation – on the otherhand it has turned them apolitical. Except for Ambedkar's conversion which was really a political conversion (Buddhists Dalits are highly motivated and active with a Humanist vision) conversion to either Islam or Christianity has not really helped, even if they are better than the brahmanical system. Those who are motivated by the desire to preserve Hinduism insist that the scriptures do not discriminate against them! When we report that people are dying of hunger in the remote corners of the country, the religious gangs pack their bags with bibles and food and set out for these villages to 'save' their souls; and the Hindus scramble to the affected areas to 'save' the victims from being converted. None seem interested in empowering them.

Dalits are entering the Humanist movement of their own accord. If Humanists themselves reach out to the Dalits, the results will be dramatic.

Starting Again

What binds the Dalits together is a common-sense of denial of dignity by the brahmanical system, a denial of justice by religious scriptures and religious system. What they fear is violence by the dominant upper castes and also by those in power – including the police and the administration. Since the Dalits have been victims of religious values and a society based on religiously ordained and sanctioned caste, it is humanist values which can bring them dignity and human rights.



What use is religion for the hungry?

We have therefore to introduce Humanism and Humanist values to all our developmental programmes. Our aim is clear. We do not want the Dalits to suppress themselves with the burden of God, be that a Christian God or a Muslim God or a Hindu God. For us, the concept of God itself is the creation of an exploitative society and the sooner we get rid of it, the better it would be for entire society. We do not wish the Dalits to 'convert' to Humanism; but we will have to create a humanist alternative for the Dalits – this is what Dr. Ambedkar did when he identified Buddhism as an option for Dalits.

Cultural emancipation and economic empowerment of the Dalits will mean their liberation from the shackles of religion and the oppression of the idea of God. It will mean the Dalits obtaining training in alternative livelihood skills. This will necessitate offering them training and education in practical skills as well as in universal human rights and in Humanism.

Dalits are entering the Humanist movement of their own accord. When Humanists themselves take the initiative to reach out to the Dalits, the results will be dramatic.

Vidya Bhushan Rawat is leader of Delhi-based IHEU Member Organisation Social Development Foundation, and an activist for Dalit Rights. He has recently made a film of the plight of the rat catcher community in North India.

Humanism through the Buddha

V.B. Rawat

To mark the 50th anniversary of Dr. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism, ceremonies were organized all over India in October and November 2006. Nearly 100,000 Dalits converted to Buddhism in these ceremonies. V.B. Rawat participated in a ceremony in Delhi.

Conversion as Emancipation

Over seventy years ago, on 13 October 1935, Dr. Ambedkar declared in a public speech at Yeola: "I solemnly assure you that I will not die a Hindu. On 31 May 1936, he said to a large gathering of Mahars – people belonging to the untouchable caste of cultivators and laborers that he was born in – "Hinduism does not recognize the importance of the individual, and therefore it is not acceptable to me. The religion which, with an intention to educate a few, keeps the rest in darkness, is not a religion but a conspiracy to keep the people in mental slavery.

"Man is not for religion, religion is for man. To become human, convert yourselves. To get organized, convert yourselves. To achieve strength, convert yourselves. To secure equality, convert yourselves. To get liberty, convert yourselves.

"Why do you remain in that religion which does not treat you as human beings? Why do you remain in that religion which does not allow you to educate yourselves? Why do you remain in that religion which prohibits you from entering a temple. Why do you remain in that religion which prohibits you from access to water? A religion which prohibits righteous relations between man and man, is not a religion but a display of force".

Quoting from the Buddha's last message, Ambedkar said in his speech: "Be self illuminating like the sun. Don't be dependent for the light like the earth. Believe in yourself, don't be dependent on others. Be truthful. Always take refuge in the truth and do not surrender to anybody." Ambedkar then concluded "I also take refuge in the words of the Buddha. Be your own guide. Take refuge in your own reason".

On 14 Nov 2006, Ambedkar converted along with an estimated half a million other Dalits to Buddhism – Dr. Ambedkar's version of Buddhism is a humanistic one, but some philosophers do not find justification for Dr. Ambedkar's interpretation. In anycase, Dr. Ambedkar himself administered 22 oaths to all the Dalits who were converting - 8 of the 22 oaths relate to rejecting Hindu Gods and Goddesses, abjuring the use of Brahmins in rituals, rejecting the view that God has taken birth or incarnation in any form, and affirming that the Buddha was not an incarnation of Vishnu. Other oaths relate to loyalty to Buddhist philosophy, telling the truth, rejecting alcohol and vowing never to steal. There was very little religion in the conversion ritual, but it was present.

50 Years on

Nearly ten thousand Dalits from different parts of the country embraced Buddhism relinquishing the Varnashram based Hinduism, in a remarkable political ceremony on 29 October 2006, in New Delhi to mark 50 years of Ambedkar's conversion. I use the word 'political ceremony' in terms of the programme and its content.



The organizers of the programme, particularly Dr Avtar Singh, Commissioner, Gurgaon, Dr Rajshekar Vundru, a Senior officer of the Indian Administrative Service, Ashok Bharati, Convener, National Conference of Dalit Organisations (NACDOR) ensured that there were no rituals. It was a largely Humanist ceremony – and speaker after speaker spoke against the tyranny of religion, dangers of superstition and the need for embracing the alternative that Dr Ambedkar had developed.

A number of social activists as well as some enlightened Dalit intellectuals and officers came from different parts of the country. Political speeches were made and enlightening plays attracted the attention of the people. There were 50 odd bhikkhus (monks) present on the platform along with a large number of social activists and intellectuals. Their symbolic role of giving 'deeksha' (initiation) was confined to merely 5-10 minutes. There was no show of mysticism or claims of miracles or chanting in praise of God.

Cassettes, songs, books on Dr Ambedkar, and other Dalit heroes sold like hotcakes. I spoke to many Dalit women who had put their stalls at the Ram Leela ground to find what has changed in their lives after embracing Buddhism. Each of them said that they now save a lot of money because of not following any Hindu rituals. "Dalits are too much into rituals. Whether it is the birth of a child or the death of family members, everything is taken by the Brahmin, even if you suffer from fever, priests are there to grab you. Once you have left the dirty caste games of Hinduism, you get rid of all those practices". I was pleasantly surprised by such reactions.

Many Humanists had objected to Ambedkar's conversion ritual in 1956 as it had religious ceremonies. However, for Ambedkar, delinking the Dalits from Hinduism was the first and foremost priority. Secondly, despite Ambedkar's knowledge of Marx and his ideas, he could not digest the idea of violence and dictatorship. Thirdly, the 22 oaths that Ambedkar wanted Dalits to adopt at the time of conversion are but humanist in essence.

For people like me who are working in solidarity with those struggling for their dignity, embracing Buddhism as prescribed by Dr Ambedkar was a matter of immense satisfaction. I have been a Humanist for the last 20 years, but I rejoice my formal way of embracing Humanism through the Buddha.

Community On Fire

V.B. Rawat

Killing for land

It is beyond belief. Four members of the Bhotmange's family were butchered to death by the upper caste villagers of Khairlanji, a village in Maharashtra state, India. The community wanted to grab this Dalit family's land – two 2 acres of land had already been taken in the name of common passage; and the upper caste villagers were pressurizing the family to give up their remaining 3 acres as well. The Bhotmanges family of Khairlanji was a Buddhist Dalit family, and they were trying to live with dignity and resisted all attempts to deprive them of their property. It seems that the immediate provocation for the killings was that Surekha and Priyanka had testified against 15 of the upper caste people beating up of one Siddharth Gajbhiye (also a Dalit) earlier that month. This could not be allowed.

Surekha (44 years), her daughter Priyanka 18 years, sons Rakesh 23 years and Sudhir, 29 years were first pulled out from their hut and stripped naked. According to Sujata and Chhaya Khobargade who investigated, 'these women were stripped naked by the uppercaste women'. Surekha's sons were also stripped and asked to rape their mother and sister. When they refused to follow, they were hacked to death. One of the sons named Sudhir was a physically challenged person. Later, the mother and daughters were raped and killed. Their bodies were found next day, naked.

Complaints were lodged with the police and yet no action was taken. The Dalits waited for many days patiently – neither the government officials nor the media visited them. The state government which did not take prompt action against the accused acted quickly to arrest those who were protesting its inaction. At the India Social Forum 2006, New Delhi, Dalit organizations led by National Conference of Dalit Organisations, NACDOR, held a big demonstration at the Jantar Mantar where a large number of human rights and Dalit activists demanded immediate punishment for those responsible for this heinous crime against humanity. "If the Maharashtra government does not take action against the culprits, the situation would go out of hand," social activists warned. And it did.

Dalit reaction

After a month-and-a-half, the patience of the Dalits boiled over. Kamptee, a predominantly Dalit area near Nagpur city saw violence as a mob of Dalits pelted stones, damaged vehicles and set a few of them ablaze to protest the killings and the police inaction. Five police officers and 12 policemen were injured and curfew had to be clamped. About 10,000 Dalits marched in the city of Amaravati, protesting violently the killings and the



Deccan Queen on fire

government inaction. As the violence by the Dalits spread, the media finally came to report and the government started taking action: the Home Minister R R Patil ordered a Crime Investigation Department inquiry into the Kamptee/Nagpur incidents but not what happened at Bhandara's Khairlanji village. The issue is now being side tracked as the government wants to know how much of the violence by Dalits was prompted by Maoists.

Dalit revolt?

Embracing Buddhism is itself a revolt against the dominant caste culture of India. It is a revolt and a revolution. But the Dalit community is ill served by its leadership which is easily bought out by the dominant castes. When people do not have a lawful avenue for growth or for redressal of grievances, their reactions can be unpredictable.

Akka Yadav's case in Nagpur is an example. Yadav was a local goon who sexually harassed women, specially Dalit women. With his connections in the police and in society he always got away. During the Nagpur violence the Dalit crowd attacked Yadav and his friend and killed them on the spot.

Recently a statue of Dr. Ambedkar was damaged by miscreants in North India. In protest, the Dalits of Ulhasnagar near Mumbai set on fire the prestigious Deccan Queen train. The railways incurred a huge loss of 70 million Indian Rupees.

They are growing restless. They need justice. And as a wounded community they do not need any provocations now. But the Maharashtra government has not learnt any lessons and pays no heed to this wake up call. The price of this failure could prove to be one which India cannot afford to pay.

The Buraku People of Japan

Babu Gogineni

Untouchability in East Asia

Apart from India, Nepal and Pakistan, at least four other Asian countries are tainted by the practice of untouchability. Thus we see that communities of untouchables exist, though rarely talked about, in Japan, Korea, Burma and even Tibet. While Japan is a moderate exception, not much data is available about the life style and conditions of the untouchables in the other three countries. However, be it the *para-gyoon* (the Pagoda slaves of old Burma), the *Paekchong* of Korea, the *Ragyapa* of Tibet or the *Burakumin* of Japan, we find here, as we find elsewhere in Nigeria (see page 18) or in medieval Europe (see page 21) dirty, ugly, lazy and dishonest. The untouchable is sub-human, has to be shunned and should be cast out of society.

Historically, the ostracism of the untouchable started because his or her occupation was believed to be unclean, or more importantly, considered impure by the religious authorities. For example, if a person's profession involves slaughtering animals, working with leather or digging graves, it was the association with the impurities of death that made them tainted. Since they are ritually impure, they must be despised by all right thinking members of society. The untouchable should not be allowed to pollute others, so to protect society they have to live away from the common people, and can interact with other members of society only when allowed to do so.

It started originally as a simple a division of labour, and at a time when social mobility was easy – but soon religious notions come in, and turn a social arrangement into a rigidly enforced oppressive structure, whose victims have no real remedy.

Japan and the Buraku People

Japan has been noted for its deep social divisions right from ancient times. While divisions in Japanese society can be seen as early as the 1st century CE, by 700 AD, Japanese society was clearly divided into the *Ryomin* (the good people) and the *Senmin* (the lowly people). The *Senmin* were the workers and were made of temple slaves, private slaves, government cultivators and tank guards. Apart from them, there were the semi-*Senmin*: the skilled *Zakko* who were engaged in leather work, tanning, cloth dyeing, shoemaking and weapon manufacture and the *Etori* (or *Eta*) who gathered food for the hawks and dogs of the imperial family.

When, under the influence of Buddhism, *Takatsukasa* the Imperial Department of Falconry in the Royal household was abolished in 860 CE, the *Etori* became butchers. When the slaughter of animals began to be despised (but eating meat was not rejected!), the *Etori* and others who worked with animal products lost their jobs and several of these became hunters, wanderers or vagabonds. Others became musicians and entertainers.

These professions began to be associated with forbidden or impious activities. In the later Chusei period (1192 - 1603) four divisions can be seen in



Mask dance, depicting the plight of the Burakumin

Japanese society: the nobility, the warriors, the peasants and the *Senmin*. Interestingly, there was considerable social mobility amongst the classes, and the *Senmin* who were in considerable demand for the services they rendered to the *Bushi*, the warriors, were even exempt from taxation in return for their services. Such was the social mobility in Japanese society then that several warriors who were defeated in war joined the *Senmin* for tax advantages! Despite this attraction, the *Senmin* in reality continued to be at the bottom of society, and continued to live on river banks, away from the general settlements and cities, for when they were not performing military duties, they were still engaged in 'lowly tasks'.

The Tokugawa Feudal System

It was under the strict and rigid Tokugawa feudal system (1603 - 1867) that the fate of the *Senmin* was sealed. In this period the prejudices of ritual obsessed Shintoism and Buddhism combined with the rigours of military dictatorship to make their lives truly miserable – probably only slightly better than the plight of the untouchables in India during the time of the Peshwa rulers in Maharashtra. The Tokugawa Shogunate ordained that there be 4 castes: the warrior, farmer, artisan and merchant. Outside these four castes were the outcaste groups of *Eta* (Great Filth) and the *Hinin* (literally meaning not Human). Sourced from the *Senmin*, the *Eta* were made of the poorest of the merchant and farming classes; and into the *Hinin* were put criminals as well as survivors of suicide.

As they were not considered human, the Eta and the Hinin were exempt from taxation!

The *Eta* and the *Hinin* were not included in the census, though their names had to be entered in separate registers maintained by the government. Since they were not considered human, the *Eta* and the *Hinin* were exempt from taxation – the reasons for the tax exemption had changed from the Chusei period. Consistent with this understanding that the *Eta* and the



Hinin were not human, as late as in 1857, a Japanese court ruled that the life of 7 Etas was equal to that of one human being and that until this count was achieved, a commoner could not be tried for murder.

Shimamura writes about the plight of the Eta in this dark period: (They had to) “wear more humble clothes than farmers, identifying themselves by rectangular pieces of cloth five by four inches attached to their clothes. When approaching the home of a commoner, the *Eta* were required to take off their headgear and footwear before entering the courtyard. Sitting, eating, and smoking in company of the commoners was also denied them”.

The Meiji Restoration (1868 – 1912)

Early in its life, in 1871, the Meiji government, which was the modernizer of Japan, issued an emancipation edict which was the first sign of recognition by the authorities of the humanity of those belonging to these classes. As per the emancipation decree the use of the terms Eta and Hinin was abolished. The government also decreed that the citizenship registers of the Eta-Hinin and the general citizenship be merged.

However, the problem was not solved since the government set up at the same time a new class system composed of the Kazoku (peers) the Shizoku (descendants of former warriors) and the Heimin (commoners composed of former farmers, artisans and merchants). This, combined with a modified system of family registers – the Koseki system – that listed each citizen's family background in great detail undid many of

They had to wear more humble clothes than farmers, identifying themselves by rectangular pieces of cloth five by four inches attached to their clothes. The Eta were required to take off their headgear and footwear before entering the courtyard of a commoner.

the social advances made by the Eta and the Hinin. Even though the emancipation edict meant that the Senmin could live anywhere in the country and could take up any occupation, they were put down in the register as *Shin-Heimin* or new commoners – an obvious and clear indication of their social origins! In addition to this, the fact that the Koseki register also recorded the place of birth of the individual (and geographical origin of family) meant that the data provided adequate information about the untouchable origins of the individuals. Prospective employers and life partners could – and did – easily investigate and avoid making the mistake of associating with an untouchable. The Koseki system as it existed then violated the privacy of all individuals – for example, it also enabled discrimination against unwed mothers by formally recording this information.

After the banning of the use of the terms, gradually, the Eta and the Hinin began to be referred to as the Buraku people or the Burakumin. While Buraku originally meant a community or a hamlet, when the word is used to refer to the former Eta and Hinin communities, it is actually a shortened version of *Tokushu-Buraku* meaning special communities – again revealing to us the imperfect reform of the Meiji where the people continued to be exposed to grave prejudice and discrimination.

While the term Buraku is still used generally, the government refers to them as ‘*Dowa*’, in line with the use of the word in 1926 by Emperor Showa in his ascension address. *Dowa* means the ‘same people’, and the Emperor was proclaiming the equality of all Japanese, including the Eta and the Hinin. One recalls that Gandhi referred to the untouchables in Indian society as Harijans or Children of God, a term that the untouchables no longer like. In Japan too, the term preferred by the untouchables for themselves is Buraku.

The Buraku today

Minorities constitute 4% of Japan's 127 million citizens. The Buraku are the largest minority, but there are also 650,000 Korean nationals, apart from the Ainu people (the aboriginals). The Buraku Liberation League established estimates their number to be around 3 million – many times more than the official estimates. The Buraku are concentrated in the Western part of Japan and they constitute 10% of people in Osaka and Fukuoka prefectures.

In 1970, in an effort to make the situation better for the Buraku, the Japanese government instructed the officials that details relating to one's birth address should be deleted from the Koseki registry. In 1974, the Ministry of Health and Welfare forbade the practice of showing family registry details to prospective employers, and in 1975 family lineage names were deleted so that

tracing a person to his or her Buraku origins would be difficult. In 1976, access to family registry was restricted and today only the police and a limited number of government organs can access these apart from the individual concerned.

Scandalously, however, between 1976 and 1980, nine lists from the Koseki registers were secretly sold at high prices to big companies and major banks. They were bought by the prospective employers with the obvious intent of identifying the Buraku amongst employees and job applicants so that their applications could be rejected. Today about 9.4% of the Buraku are employed in government and municipal jobs, but very few hold high office – most are municipal workers engaged in garbage collection or in semi-administrative jobs.

They are virtually indistinguishable from the rest of their compatriots in their appearance, culture and religion, even though their language may at times give them away. No wonder that even today, about 33% of Burakumin have said that they are discriminated in society. A human rights activist notes that in the bookshops of Japan one is likely to find any number of books on the apartheid system, racial discrimination against the blacks in North America and elsewhere, but none on the plight of the Buraku!

Though under pressure from the Buraku Liberation League's campaign, in 1996 the Japanese Government passed the Law for the Measures for Promotion of Human Rights Protection, and even though the Buraku discrimination clearly meets the universally recognized criteria of discrimination based on race and descent,

Japan does not have a specific law which punishes discrimination of the Buraku!

Japan refuses to acknowledge the problem under the specious excuse that the Buraku are not a special race. One would expect that in that case, Japan would evolve and adopt other legislative means to penalize discrimination of the Buraku, but Japan does not have a specific law which punishes discrimination of the Buraku!

Even though about 47% of people polled have said that they would not oppose the choice of a Buraku life partner by their children, and that is a welcome improvement, the figures also indicate the formidable numbers who still do not accept the Buraku as equal human beings. Many Japanese, young and old, express disgust at even the mention of Burakumin. Urgent reform of the Koseki registers and expeditious introduction of legislation that awards exemplary punishment for the criminal practice of untouchability are necessary steps that the international community expects from Japan.

However, the problem of the Burakumin can only be solved through a cultural change amongst the Japanese people. It is, after all, Japan's imperfect modernization that is responsible for the persistence of this problem – often ignored by the rest of the world, dazzled by Japan's economic strength and prowess, and usually confused by the persistence of superstition in daily life as quaint expressions of Japanese culture.

The information for this article has been sourced from Masami Dewaga's dissertation *Racism without Race? The Case of Japan's Invisible Group*.

Untouchability in Nigeria

Leo Igwe

Scornfully referred to as sacrificial lambs to the gods (ndi ejiri goro ihe in the Ibo language), the Osu are the untouchables of Nigeria. They are stereotyped as lazy, dirty and dishonest, and are shunned by the rest of society for their alleged repulsive body odour. IHN focuses on the plight of nearly two million unfortunate human beings who, despite legislation designed to help them overcome their social disability, continue to be at the bottom of society, and are generally considered the scum of the earth.

The Igbo Disease

Untouchability is practised in Nigeria mostly among the Igbos in the South. While this abhorrent practice also exists in Edo State where those discriminated are called Uneme, this article deals with the situation in the Igboland where the practice is the most pronounced and well entrenched. The untouchables amongst the Igbo are known by different names – Oru or Ohu, Ume or Omoni, but the general name for them is Osu.

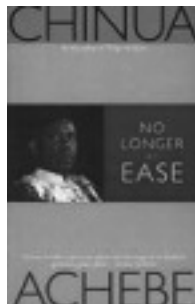
A person is untouchable as a consequence of being unclean, and because he or she possesses the capacity to defile others. An untouchable is held in isolation out of fear that the person would contaminate the rest of society. Such an outcast has diminished dignity, rights and opportunity. An untouchable is not fit for the

companionship and association of decent and respectable men and women in society.

In Igbo traditional society there are two classes of people: the Nwadiala (Freeborn) and the Osu. The Nwadiala or the Freeborn are the masters, or the sons of the soil. The Osu are slaves, strangers and aliens, and they are subjected to various forms of abuse and discrimination. They live separately from the Freeborn, and in most cases, very close to the shrines or market places. It is said that the system originated some two hundred years ago when some people were dedicated to the gods and became ritual slaves. It then became a

taboo for people to socialize with those who have been dedicated to the gods.

The famous Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe asks "What is this thing called Osu?" in his well known novel *No Longer At Ease*. He answers "Our fathers in their darkness and ignorance called an innocent man Osu, a thing given to idols, and thereafter he became an outcast, and his children, and his children's children forever."



Chinua Achebe's No Longer at Ease, 1960

Discrimination

The Osu are not allowed to dance, drink, walk, associate with, or have sexual relations with the Nwadiala or the Freeborn. The Igbo welcome ritual of presenting a kola nut to a guest who in turn breaks it is not available to an Osu. No Osu can pour libation or pray to God on behalf of a Freeborn as it is believed that such prayers bring calamity and misfortune. In his book, *Ihiteafoukwu: The Echo of Igbo Culture*, Nzewuba Ugwu (2004, Ibadan:Cypress) captures the systemic discrimination meted out to the Osu: "They (Osus) cannot plant their crops near or close to Nwadiala (Freeborn) nor can they plant at the time Nwadiala plants or sows his crops and seeds. They cannot marry or be married among the people. They can only be buried at (sic) certain days of the week ... they cannot be conferred with Ozo, Nze or Oji Ofo titles, nor can they become Akaraka (traditional ruler). An Osu cannot represent the community, nor act on behalf of the people."

It is indeed regarded as an abomination for an Osu to rule or lead any community. Not too long ago, a person alleged to be an Osu was elected the head of a village council in Mbaise. But shortly after that, members of the community came under pressure from the surrounding communities and subsequently forced him to step down. How can it be otherwise in a community where it is even forbidden to buy seed yam from the Osu, as it is believed that this would lead to a bad harvest? Again, when a radical traditional ruler once wanted to honour an Osu with a traditional title, members of his community vehemently opposed it and threatened to kidnap and murder him if he dared honour an untouchable.

In 1989, there was a communal clash in Ifakala in Imo State, over the location of a water borehole. A section of the community refused to drink water from the borehole on the ground that it was located on Osu land. The bore hole had to be abandoned.

The Osu caste system is also very pronounced in the area of marriage. An Osu cannot contract a marriage with a Freeborn. Because of the Osu factor, marriages in Igbo society are preceded by investigations – elders from both sides travel to native villages to find out the social status of the other party. And if per chance it is discovered that one of them is an Osu, the marriage plan is automatically abandoned. There have been numerous cases where married couples have been forced to divorce because one of the parties was discovered to be an Osu – people believe that a Freeborn marrying an Osu is like inviting a "curse" on the family. In Chinua Achebe's story, Okonkwo learns that his son Obi wants to marry Clara, an Osu. Okonkwo says: "Osu is like leprosy in the minds of our people. I beg of you my son not to bring the mark of shame and of leprosy into your family. If you do, your children and your children's children into the third and fourth generations will curse you and your memory. It is not for myself I speak, my days are few. You will bring sorrow on your head and on the heads of your children. Who will marry your daughters? Whose daughters will your sons marry?"

The Osu are not allowed to dance, drink, walk, associate with, or have sexual relations with the Nwadiala or the Freeborn.

Legislative Remedy

In 1956, the government of Eastern Nigeria passed a law abolishing the Osu caste system.

The law says: "Notwithstanding any custom or usage, each and every person who on the date of the commencement of this Law is Osu shall from and after such

date cease to be Osu and shall be free and discharged from any consequences thereof, and the children thereafter to be born to any such person and the offspring of such person shall not be Osu. Osu System is hereby utterly and forever abolished and declared unlawful." The legislation prescribes punishment for whoever practices the Osu system:

"Whoever-

- (a) prevents any person from exercising any right accruing to him by reason of the abolition of the Osu System; or
- (b) molests, injures, annoys, obstructs, or causes or attempts to cause obstruction to any person in the exercise of any such right, or molests, injures, annoys or boycotts any person by reason of his having exercised any such right; or
- (c) by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representations or otherwise, incites or encourages any person or class of persons or the public generally to practise the Osu System in any form whatsoever, guilty of an offence and upon conviction shall be liable to a fine not exceeding six months."

It further states "Whoever, on the ground that a person-

- (a) if this Law had not been passed, would have become Osu; or
- (b) has refused to practise the Osu System; or
- (c) has done any act in furtherance of the objects of this Law,

denies to any person belonging to his community or section thereof any right or privilege, to which such person as a member of such community would be entitled, is guilty of an offence and upon conviction shall be liable to a fine not exceeding fifty pounds or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months." (Cecil Geraint Amens, *The Laws of Eastern Nigeria* revised Edition 1963. Enugu: Government Printer 1964).

Not a Single Prosecution!

The legislation abolishing the Osu caste system was lauded by progressive minds as a major step toward the eradication of this cultural scourge. But unfortunately the law has not yielded the desired results – it only succeeded in driving the whole system underground. The Osu are no longer openly and verbally attacked as used to be the case. But their socio-cultural and political isolation and discrimination especially in matters concerning marriage and leadership continues. 50 years after the enactment of the law that abolished the Osu system no one has been prosecuted or convicted for breaking the law.

In 1997, a person alleged to be an Osu was made a chief of a community in Imo State. But six months later, the community was engulfed in a crisis. And when the case was

brought to the court. The presiding judge noted that though the abolition of the Osu system was in the statute, it was “an unenforceable law.” The chief was dethroned so that peace may reign again in the community!

The 1956 laws have been ineffective in tackling the Osu system. Some say that the Osu system is not an issue that can be resolved through legislation: it is a traditional practice that requires a traditional solution.

Traditional Approach

Some traditional rulers and communities have taken steps to eradicate the Osu system. Community leaders have issued proclamations and declarations against the practice of untouchability. For instance, (Dr) Enyeribe Onuoha, the traditional ruler of Umuchieze – and currently the Chairman of the Nigerian Humanist Movement – has spoken out against the practice of untouchability in his community: “discrimination against Osus in Igboland in modern times is irrational, illegal, unjust, superstitious, extremely primitive and archaic, and opposed to human rights. It is one Umuchieze tradition that should immediately be abolished!” However, statements and declarations like this have fallen on deaf ears amongst a people who think that traditional and social norms especially those hinged on the supernatural are sacrosanct and should not be tampered with.

According to the Igbo tradition and culture, it is only in one’s ancestral home that one can have the full rights of a Freeborn. So, another traditionalist solution being proffered is that the Osu should return to their ancestral home. The fact, however, is that no one – not even the Osu themselves can trace their roots or locate their ancestral homes.

The Role of Religion

The Osu are untouchable because they are dedicated to god. The dedication to god makes the Osu’s untouchability a permanent, irreversible and unchangeable disability and stigma. The Osu system is sanctioned and sanctified by traditional religion which prevailed before the advent of Christianity.

“They were appointed slaves of the shrine and declared untouchable: sacred”.

The advent of Christianity made little or no impact on the Osu system. Most church leaders have been reluctant to confront the issue head on for fear of alienating the majority. And this has created a situation where the Osu system is practised by Christians. In some churches the harvest offering of Osus are kept separate from those of the Freeborn. Dr. Onuoha noted this about the Christians in his community (The Land and People of Umuchieze Owerri: Austus Printers and Publisher): “Umuchieze Christians still believe in the dividing line between the so-called Nwadiala or Nwafor and the Osu – sons of the soil and bondsmen. “Bondsmen” are descendants of certain individuals who were bonded to the W’iyi goddess or to Amadioha in the olden days.

They were appointed slaves of the shrine and declared untouchable: sacred. Christians of today bluntly refuse to stop this discrimination based in the traditional religion”.

The Church has come under severe criticism for failing to address the Osu issue. Ernest Emenyeonu made this expressly clear when he said “The Igbo are among the most zealous Christians found anywhere on earth, yet neither Christianity nor education had done anything decisive to eradicate the Osu system. The Clergy, the Bishops and Knights of the Church all preach against the Osu system but their utterances are mere words that are not meant to reflect personal beliefs and actions. The Church in Igboland is famous for its Eucharistic Congresses, its Synods, and its Assemblies. In many of these gatherings, the Church hierarchy in Igboland may go as far as to condemn racism in South Africa, racism in Eastern Europe or attack racism in America but would never address the issue of the Osu system in Igboland. It is a classic example of removing the mole in the other man’s eye while ignoring the big and gaping sore in your own eye. To this extent the Church in Igboland is an abysmal failure in social responsibility”.

The Humanist Way Forward

One should not blame the Church for not tackling the Osu issue in Nigeria. The Church – like the Osu caste system – is rooted in religion, in theism, in superstition and in supernaturalism. When it comes to the Osu issue, religion is part of the problem and therefore cannot be the solution. A radical and lasting solution lies outside religion, outside theism and outside supernaturalism.

The Osu caste system will continue so long as the Igbos embrace religion, spiritualism and supernaturalism. Untouchability will not be eradicated until Nigerians in general begin to realize that the gods and spirits are imaginary beings, not objective realities. They need to understand that gods and spirits were concepts used to control and organize society at the infancy of the human race. If one does not believe in any god or spirit, the idea of treating someone as an untouchable because the person is dedicated to a god or spirit would make no sense.

Politically, the government must try to enforce the law abolishing the Osu system. State authorities must get communities to remove from their constitutions provisions that bar Osus from contesting local elections and from receiving traditional titles. The Nigerian state must rise up to its duty of protecting the equal rights of citizen irrespective of his or her sex, ethnic origin, religion or birth status.

Most importantly, the Igbo must begin to envision a new society where people will live and interact freely with each other without division and distinction on the basis of touchability and untouchability.

Leo Igwe is Executive Secretary of Nigerian Humanist Movement and an IHEU’s Growth and Development Committee representative in Africa.

'Cagots' of Béarn: The *Pariahs* of France

Gérard da Silva

Parts of Europe had their own *pariahs* for several centuries, a practice that persisted until the end of the 17th Century. These European 'untouchables' were called 'agots' in Spain (especially in Navarre), 'Cacoux' in Brittany, and 'Cagots' in the South East of France, particularly in the region of Béarn. Gérard da Silva writes on how this heinous social excommunication was tackled in France a few centuries ago.

Various Justifications

In the region of Béarn they were given many names. Apart from the term 'cagot', they were also called 'crestias' or 'gésitains'. To explain their lowly station and to legitimise their *pariah* status, some claimed that 'cagot' referred to 'goth'. This allowed them to justify the social exclusion of these people because they were now descendants of the 'goths', the barbaric and pagan groups which conquered much of Europe during the middle ages.

At the same time, it was also claimed that the term 'crestias' was a contraction of 'Christians': this too, of course, justified their exclusion from society of that time! In addition, 'Gésitain' is a rather unique name because it comes from the name of the biblical personality Gehazi, the dishonest servant of Elisha, the 'man of God'.

The Bible tells us the story of the leprosy-afflicted Naaman, Army Chief of the King of Syria. Naaman went to Israel where Elisha cured him. When Naaman offers generous gifts to Elisha, Elisha refuses to accept them and sends Naaman on his way back to Syria. Gehazi however has other plans, and tells Naaman that Elisha had changed his mind and had asked him to send some gifts through him. These of course, Gehazi keeps for himself. When Elisha finds out the truth, he curses Naaman saying «Naaman's leprosy will cling to you and to your posterity for ever». Gehazi then leaves Elisha's home with a leprosy white as the snow » (*Livre des Rois* II, 5, verset 27). Thus 'cagots' or the 'gésitains' were not simply descendents of a greedy servant, they also carried with them the ancient curse of being carriers of the dreaded 'white leprosy'.

Like Lepers

The physical description of 'cagots' is full of contradictions. According to Francisque Michel's *Histoire des races maudites* (History of the Cursed Races, 1847, Paris), 'cagots' had frizzy brown hair, if not blond hair and blue eyes! In another legend aimed at explaining and justifying their existence and treatment, the 'cagots' were described as being physically like the Arabs – therefore their being treated as untouchables was justified. So a 'cagot' descended from the barbaric invaders of the East, but had blond hair and blue eyes ... The accusations against the 'cagots' and the justification for their social exclusion as *pariahs* is full of contrary facts and irrationality, but they seem to have a historical and religious basis. Whatever the cause, the social exclusion of the 'cagots' persisted over a long period.

In reality, the 'cagots' were treated like lepers and were for centuries victims of a social excommunication. This was as much because they were considered to be carriers of a disease, as for supposedly having disqualifying physical characteristics: no ear lobes, flat foot etc.

In the standard reference work on the subject *Les cagots du Béarn* (The Cagots of Béarn ed. Minerve, Paris, 1988), A. Guerreau et Yves Guy, lists the prohibitions prescribed to the 'cagots': They had an obligation to practice the trade of carpenter. They were excluded from agriculture and animal husbandry. There were not allowed to walk bare foot, they could not enter a flour mill, they were not allowed to drink from the same containers as the others, they were prohibited from using the same bathing places as the others, nor were they allowed to wash dishes along with the others, they could not dance with the other villagers. As far as their presence in a Church was concerned, they had to enter the Church by a separate door (usually low, obliging them to bend, reminding them of their status), keep away from the other inhabitants of the village, and have their own vessels and material even for benediction. They had to be buried in a separate section of the cemetery – but more often, in a separate cemetery itself.



The cagots of the Church of Campan had their own separate vessels.

A Strictly Social Cause

Thus, a section of the population of Béarn (but also other places in Europe) were, for centuries, living away from the cities and the villages, with no social rights, and with a status less than that of the serfs. In addition to their accursed sub-human status, they carried the stigma

of being suspected carriers and transmitters of leprosy. Certain tasks and professions were reserved for the 'cagots': they had to be carpenters (live close to the woods and the forests), make coffins and be grave digger and undertakers; they had to be rope makers (as was the case with the 'cacoux' of Brittany). Their trade and profession led to a socially inferior status, reflecting their abilities. They were sub-human men of the woods, unsocial and asocial. They carried out tasks linked to death – hence they were carpenters making coffins, or undertakers dealing with the dead or executioners, carrying out capital punishments. They made wine barrels and did wicker work – in fact anything connected to rot and putrefaction. The cause here for their professions and their lowly status was neither historic nor religious, but purely social.

In the Middle Ages these people began to be associated with the accursed populations of lepers – so their exclusion could be justified. We can date their association with lepers to the XIIIth century, though it is unclear from when the tasks and professions they were obliged to perform were ostracised.

Protest

The 'cagots' revolted against the injustice they were suffering : in 1514, the 'cagots' of Béarn made a representation to the Pope Leo X. The Pope, fully acknowledging the reference to white leprosy of Ghéhazi, from whom the 'agots' would have descended, published a bull instructing that these populations be treated 'with kindness, in the same way as the other believers', and charged an official, Juan de Santa Maria, with executing the Bull. Despite the favourable arbitration of Charles Quint in 1524, this formal equality would still be refused to the 'agots' of Navarre for a long time.

The 'cagots' of Béarn were not passive and their battle achieved its first victory in the cities of Lectoure and Saint Clar, whose 'cagots' protested regarding their status in front of the Parliament of Toulouse in 1629. As a consequence, the Parliament of Toulouse conducted a medical inspection to determine whether the 'cagots' were indeed carriers of leprosy. The conclusions were, of course, negative, and Parliament passed a law prohibiting all forms of segregation of sections of populations. (*Les cagots du Béarn*). However, the political and religious authorities of the time continued to maintain that in general the status of the 'cagots' was justified.

1683 or the end of *Pariahs* in France

It was in 1683 that Du Bois de Baillet, the steward of the King Louis XIV, commissioned a historical study of the 'cagots'. Once again, doctors examined the 'cagots' and stated that they did not suffer from any disease which necessitated their exclusion from other social groups. Du Bois de Baillet wrote in the study « Liberty being a characteristic of this kingdom ... slavery and all that could bear the characteristics of slavery having been banned, we have learnt with sorrow that there still

In addition to their accursed sub-human status, they carried the stigma of being suspected carriers and transmitters of leprosy.

remain some signs of it in this Kingdom »

As a consequence, the Parliaments of the city of Pau, Toulouse and Bordeaux were appraised of the situation. The number of Cagots then were estimated to be a minimum of 10,000 people and the state paid two gold coins per person to enable them to secure their liberty. But the French

Kingdom was not as «'free' as claimed, and one had to wait till the Revolution of 1789 to definitively end the deplorable social and living conditions of the 'cagots'.

Lessons from a French Struggle

How the 'cagots' improved their lot is clear : at first the *pariahs* protested to the supreme authorities. This authority, if it was religious, recognised, like Leo X, that the religious justification for the social exclusion of the 'cagots' was unfounded. If the authority was political, it observed on the basis of Reason (in this case, on the conclusion of medical doctors) that the accusation of being hereditary carriers of leprosy and of having physical malformations were equally unfounded. In reaction to this, the social groups and forces which desired the exclusion of the carpenters, of rope makers, of undertakers and other despised professions protested the decision of the supreme authority. But they were soon obliged to recognise and to accept that there could not be anymore any *pariahs* in France.

This modest lesson of a little known aspect of French history is worth reflecting upon. Firstly, we recognise that the problem of *pariahs* or untouchables was not limited to the Indian sub-continent or to Japan, but that also parts of the Western world experienced it, and for a long time legitimised it as well. There are still some countries where some people believe that the status of *pariah* to some sections of population is justified and that it is a unique aspect of their history. The history of the 'cagots' shows that this is false. Japan claims that the *pariahs* of the nation have disappeared with the Meiji era (1871 law). However, the problem of the *burakumin* continues; and since March 1922 the National Society for Equality (*zenkoku suiheisha*) has been in existence. It is probable that the 'imperial' social structure of Japan makes the march towards equality difficult (J-F Sabouret, *L'autre Japon: les Burakumin*, Ed. La Découverte, Paris, 1983).

Now for India. The practice of untouchability is neither specific to India nor is it justified. The historical and religious justifications to perpetuate the practice of untouchability, and to maintain a separate group of *pariahs* are as ill founded in India as they were in France and in Spain some centuries ago. It is appropriate that the Government of India, the supreme authority in India, has decided to put an end to a practice which is no more legitimate in India today than it was in France in 1683. All strength to the efforts to liberate a large section of humanity which is suffering from historical, social and religious prejudice.

Gérard da Silva is administrator at the Libre Pensee Francaise national headquarters in Paris.

Religious Tolerance and Non-discrimination

Matt Cherry

Matt Cherry made this important speech on behalf of IHEU at a Conference convened by the UN NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief, The Columbia Center for the Study of Human Rights and The International Center for Law and Religion Studies at Brigham Young University.

Matt Cherry spoke at the panel *Perspectives on Implementing the 1981 Declaration: History, Philosophy and Suggestions for Enhanced Implementation.*

International Humanism

I want to focus on some of the areas of freedom of religion or belief that are of particular concern to the global humanist community. In order to do this, I think I first need to introduce you to the global humanist community. We are different from other belief groups and many of our issues relate to our distinctive character.

The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) is the global umbrella group for humanist, atheist, rationalist, secularist, laïque, ethical culture, freethought and similar organizations world-wide. Founded in 1952, the first president of the IHEU was Sir Julian Huxley, the founding secretary general of UNESCO. IHEU has been closely involved in the UN since then.

The IHEU represents more than 100 organizations from 40 countries. Many of these groups consider themselves explicitly nonreligious and some consider themselves religious, but none of these groups are theistic. They all share a humanist ethical system that promotes human welfare without appeal to supernatural revelation or divine sanction. Humanists share a commitment to democracy, human rights and the open society.

Humanism is a fairly new name for a very old philosophy. The basic principles of humanism have been embraced by a wide variety of thinkers in different cultures for thousands of years. We find skepticism about gods and the supernatural in many of the ancient Greek philosophers. And even further back, in China and India, we find agnosticism about the gods leading to secular moral systems based on human welfare.

Humanists have no prophets. Our commitment to free inquiry – rational and rigorous free inquiry – means that we tend to reach our conclusions by following our own reasoning rather than by following the teachings of others. We are, first and foremost, freethinkers.

There's an old liberal joke in America that goes something like, "I don't belong to an organized political movement: I'm a member of the Democratic Party." Something similar could be said about the humanist movement. "I don't belong to an organized religious movement: I'm a Humanist."

The vast majority of Humanists – people with a positive value system that makes no appeal to a supernatural realm – do not belong to humanist groups and, indeed, would probably not describe themselves as Humanists.

Freedom of religion or belief is the only right that explicitly protects Humanists as Humanists.

The International Humanist and Ethical Union therefore sees itself as representing not just its members but also the broader community of non-religious, non-theistic, or secular people. While this may be a majority in some parts of Europe and a fast growing minority in the rest of the free world, it is also a persecuted minority in many countries.

Forsaking temples, congregations and clergy, forgoing distinctive dress or rituals, and failing to build strong organizations, Humanists are far less visible than most belief groups. This may make it easier for us to avoid persecution because of our beliefs, but I think the lack of self-identification by the non-religious also makes us more powerless in the face of discrimination.

These are two sides of the same coin. Our invisibility makes it harder to pick on us as individuals, but easier to pick on us a group or class of individuals.

Many people think of atheists as an alien threat because they don't know how many of their neighbors, and their heroes, are actually skeptical about their god. When courageous Humanists do openly stand up for their convictions, they often lack the legal, political and social support mechanisms that most religious communities have developed for persecuted members.

The International Humanist and Ethical Union unreservedly supports the whole panoply of human rights. Historically, Humanists have been at the forefront of the development of science, free inquiry, secular society and human rights.

Freedom of Religion or Belief

We don't believe that freedom of religion or belief is more important than other rights, but we do realize that it is the only right that explicitly protects humanists as humanists. It is the only right that protects us from discrimination because of our beliefs, and disbeliefs.

The United Nations Human Rights Committee, General Comment 22 on Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states that the right to freedom of religion or belief – “*protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief.*”

That is why we talk about not just “freedom of religion” but “freedom of religion or belief.” Non-religious, agnostic and atheistic beliefs are protected equally with religious beliefs.

A major concern of the humanist community is that freedom of religion is commonly thought not to include the non-religious. We find this attitude, this exclusion of the nonreligious, even among many well-meaning people. Yesterday I was a guest on a Voice of America show about freedom of religion or belief. One caller from Ghana condemned religious intolerance saying that it is wrong to discriminate on the grounds of religion because, after all, we all worship the same God.

But there is also a deliberate exclusion of the nonreligious that I think is connected to the widespread

distrust and, even, hatred of atheists. Several recent surveys have shown that atheists are the most despised minority in America. Some people limit freedom of conscience to “freedom of religion” because they want to exclude the nonreligious from the protective shield provided by the fundamental right to freedom of belief.

Freedom from Religion

We often hear that “freedom of religion does not include freedom from religion.” Well, if freedom of religion doesn’t include the right to reject any or all religious beliefs, then it cannot be freedom. It is, at best, a very limited form of tolerance, but it cannot be true freedom if it is conditional upon the details of one’s beliefs.

Whenever freedom of belief is restricted to certain kinds of beliefs or believers, we find oppressors justifying their abuses by defining some believers as outside the protected group: “They are the wrong kind of religion”; “They are heretics”; “They are little better than atheists”.

It is therefore important that we emphasize that freedom of religion or belief protects people because of their humanity, not because of their beliefs. We all share our humanity but we don’t all share the same beliefs. Indeed, I would say that we are united by our humanity and divided by our beliefs.

The humanist community has some specific concerns about national legislation. One of the most contested areas of freedom of conscience is the right to change one’s religion. And, at least in my experience, one of the most common ways people change their religion is by losing it. It doesn’t even take a humanist evangelist knocking on their door for many people to decide to reject religion! (Although the right to criticize religion – which it might be argued is the atheist version of evangelism – is often even more controversial, and persecuted, than other forms of persuasion and “witnessing” about religion.)

Apostasy and Blasphemy

In many faith traditions, leaving one’s religion is one of the very worst crimes. In parts of the Muslim world, apostasy remains a capital offense.

Blasphemy laws are a related problem. I have had friends and colleagues persecuted by these laws in Bangladesh, Pakistan and even England. Fortunately, in England they no longer have a death penalty, but my humanist colleague in Pakistan, Dr. Younus Shaikh spent more than two years on death row before the charge of blasphemy was overturned.

I am an atheist and, surely, a blasphemer. I am an infidel who encourages apostasy. And I’m proud of it. So, in a sense, I have been talking from my own self interest so far, or at least in defense of humanist colleagues who live in less tolerant places.

But there is another area of concern that the International Humanist and Ethical Union has been focusing on. And that is the increasingly common practice of invoking “freedom of religion” to defend human rights abuses. When the ambassador from Sudan is criticized for his country’s practice of stoning rape victims to death for adultery, he says “you are attacking my right to freedom of religion.”

Not so. No human right gives anyone the right to violate the human rights of another person. This is the most fundamental principle affirmed in all human rights legislation.

Just as importantly, freedom of religion does not apply to religions *per se*, it applies to individuals, to the believers. So just because a religion believes in mistreating women, it cannot claim that its rights as a religion trump the rights of the women born into that religion. Nor can a religion claim that criticism of its beliefs is an infringement of the right to freedom of religion and belief.

Offence of Defamation of Religion?

Unfortunately, we are now seeing an attempt at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva to use freedom of religion as a pretext to restrict freedom of expression. The Organization of the Islamic Conference has been successful in getting the Human Rights Council and its predecessor, the Commission on Human Rights, to condemn the “Defamation of religion” as a human rights violation. They have singled out “Islamophobia” as an area of particular concern.

We are indeed seeing terrible violations of the human rights of Muslims, both by Islamist governments and, increasingly, by Western governments in the name of security against terrorism.

The International Humanist and Ethical Union deplores all these violations. Yet we also believe that the current effort to outlaw the “defamation of religion” is unnecessary and harmful. It is unnecessary because it is already unlawful to incite hatred, discrimination and violence on the grounds of religion. It would be harmful because it could be used to restrict legitimate inquiry and to stifle free speech.

We further fear that certain Muslim states will invoke “defamation of religion” to insulate themselves from international scrutiny and criticism of their human rights record. Indeed, many of the states sponsoring this move have used national laws against defamation of religion to defend and even perpetrate human rights violations in the name of religion.

On this 25th Anniversary of the United Nations 1981 Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, we need to focus on implementing the human rights agreements we already have. We must not weaken them in the name of national security, nor water them down in the name of rights for religions. Instead, we must focus on defending freedom of conscience for every member of the human family. As the UN recognized 25 years ago, this is the best way to eliminate all forms of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief.

Matt Cherry is a member of IHEU’s UN NGO delegation at New York. He is also President of the NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the first Humanist to hold that position.

Mr. Bush's Respect for the Human Embryo Ana Lita

The Status of the Human Embryo

Recent advances in human embryonic stem cell research have brought back the focus on the status of human embryos. Questions about the moral status of human embryos arise when dealing with issues such as abortion, embryo research, assisted reproductive technology (ART), and germ-line genetic manipulation. Do these embryos deserve the same respect given to a human person? Do they have the same human rights?

On July 20th, 2006 President Bush issued the first veto of his administration, rejecting a bill that would have lightened restrictions on federal funding of embryonic stem cell research. Bush defended his veto by saying that it "would support the taking of innocent human life in the hope of finding medical benefits for others... It crosses a moral boundary that our decent society needs to respect." According to President Bush, each child created by *in vitro* fertilization, "began his or her life as a frozen embryo that was created for *in vitro* fertilization but remained unused after the fertility treatments were complete ... These boys and girls are not spare parts." President Bush characterizes embryos – including frozen ones – as human beings entitled to the same rights as other human beings.

Religion, Not Science

Mr. Bush appreciates the potential benefit of embryonic stem cell research for curing various diseases and injuries. Nonetheless, he justifies his veto by his religious belief that retrieving stem cells from human embryo is destructive, resulting in the killing of a human being or, at least, a "potential" human being. Accordingly, so goes the argument, this act cannot be justified in spite of the possible therapeutic benefits. Mr. Bush's conclusion is obviously not based on biomedical science but instead is an expression of his religious creed. Asked in March 2004 about the stem cell controversy, his science adviser, Dr. John H. Marburger III said: "I can't tell when a fertilized egg becomes sacred," and added, "That's not a science issue."

No doubt the president's belief that human life begins with fertilization is shared by millions of Americans, but it remains a minority view and one that the president appeals to inconsistently to advance his religious beliefs. Despite the fact that Mr. Bush believes that destroying an embryo amounts to intentionally killing a human being, he refuses to require legislation to stop commercial interests that are busily destroying tons of embryos in order to obtain stem cells. If their conduct amounts to "killing" human beings as the president strives to persuade us, it is hardly acceptable for him to say he will do nothing to stop these murderous acts other than refusing financial support.

Moreover, the president should offer more than his

earnest religiosity as evidence that an embryo is a human being, a position, incidentally, that many other religions have traditionally disputed. Yes, it is true that science cannot supply "proof" that embryos are or are not human beings at the moment of conception – after all, providing answers to such question is not the proper object of scientific thinking. Mr. Bush's position is wrong – and decidedly un-American. To force one's religious beliefs on others, especially when this could result in substantial personal harm, is unacceptable. Americans who could in fact benefit from human embryonic stem cell research – if the science ever in fact bears fruit – are left worse off by Mr. Bush's religious thinking.

Special Respect for Human Life

Another line of reasoning claims that human embryo research is acceptable in principle but should not be practiced out of "profound respect" for embryos as a form of human life. The Ethics Advisory Board (EAB) in the U.S., the Warnock Committee in Great Britain, and the Human Embryo Research Panel of the National Institute of Health (NIH) are arguably sympathetic to this view. In its report on *ex utero* embryonic pre-implantation, for example, the NIH panel concluded that embryos "deserve special respect" and "serious moral consideration as a developing form of human life."

But what, in fact, is "special respect?"

One way of understanding "serious moral consideration" is to recognize that, in certain cases, things which seemingly lack moral status can still have moral value. Most people would find it offensive, for example, to build a baseball field on top of sacred burial ground even though neither the piece of land nor the bodies buried underneath it are being offended or harmed. Rather the moral significance of the land stems from a moral value: respect for the dead. Respect for the dead is an intrinsic value to nearly every culture. Most people would consider it wrong, for example, to use one's dead grandfather's body as a punching bag, even if he is no longer alive and no longer has the same rights as the living. Even if grandpa agreed while he was alive to such posthumous treatment, such an act strikes us as wrong out of our respect for living humans.

Just as disrespect for the dead bothers us out of our respect for the living, so too might disrespect for embryos strike us as wrong. Embryos lack interests, rights, and moral status just like the dead, but they are symbols of life and should be treated with respect. Treating embryos with respect, however, does not necessarily mean that using them in important medical research is forbidden. Research on reproductive medicine, cancer, and other diseases has the potential for great human benefit, and using embryos in this manner – for important causes that could promote the interests

of humanity as a whole – could be considered a noble, if not heroic, endeavor. However, using embryos for a high school science experiment or for cosmetic research seems unbefitting of our respect for human life. One criterion for allowing human embryonic research might be whether the goals of such research could be accomplished in any other way. If so, then perhaps pursuit of human embryonic research *in that instance* is unacceptable and, ultimately, disrespectful.

But what about those embryos frozen in fertility clinics? In the U.S. alone there are tens of thousands of such embryos. Couples are asked to decide if they want them destroyed, donated to other couples, or used for research. Some couples cannot make the decision, and the embryos remain frozen for years. In Great Britain the maximum amount of time for storage is 5 years, and several thousand abandoned embryos are destroyed each year. Some have described this practice as “a prenatal

massacre.” However, is keeping these abandoned embryos frozen forever more respectful than discarding them or using them in valuable research? It seems more reasonable to think of respect for human embryos as arising from limitations on the ways in which they can be utilized for other purposes – not from the manner in which they are disposed.

Perhaps then parties on either side of the great stem cell divide can find some common ground. Mr. Bush may be wrong to equate human embryos with full-fledged adult human beings, but affording respect for human embryos is not necessarily incompatible with embryo research. The moral crux of the issue is not whether human embryo research *per se* is acceptable, but rather whether some research questions are worth answering.

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160 Years of Freethinking

SYMPOSIUM 1848-2008

22, 23 and 24 March 2008

Sorbonne, Paris

2008 marks the 160th anniversary of the 1848 Revolution, as well as that of the birth of the first free-thinking circles.

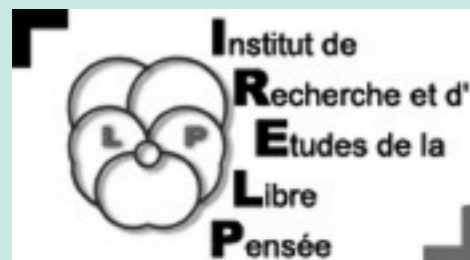
1848 is an important year in French history – it marked the end of the monarchy in France, the abolition of slavery, the establishment of universal male franchise and the assertion of the right to work, among others. It was also a year of bloody confrontation between the two Republics: the “Marianne” and the “Sociale”.

Internationally too, it was in 1848 that a wave of people's uprisings travelled through Europe and brought changes that influenced the continent's landscape for decades to come.

The proposed international symposium 1848-2008 to be organized by IRELP (Research Institute for the Study of Freethought) will examine the connections between Freethinking and Revolutions, particularly the 1848 Revolution. It will also examine the impact of the Revolution on Freethinking and on international relations, notably in Europe.

We will also draw up an inventory of free thought by documenting its historical debates, and covering the last 160 years. Perspectives for the future will be presented.

The international symposium is set to make important advances in knowledge about the



Freethought movement, secularism and internationalism. It will be preceded on Friday evening (21st March 2008) by a banquet for hundreds of guests, to commemorate the first banquet of “good Friday” organized by Sainte-Beuve, in 1868. A tradition that the French Libre Pensée movement still perpetuates today.

A scientific council has been formed with Anne Morelli (Belgium), Fred Whitehead (USA), Max Wallace (Australia), Babu Gogineni (India), Claude Jenet (France), Louis Hincker (France), Michel Vovelle (France), Henri Pena-Ruiz (France) and Françoise Brunel (France). Several organisations, including the French National Freethought Organisation, the Bund Gegen Anpassung, the Italian Freethinkers (Giordano Bruno) and the Atheist and Freethinkers Union of Spain have already announced their enthusiastic support for this important event.

Contact Jean-Marc Schiappa, President of IRELP for more information at

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The Plight of a Muslim Intellectual

Hasan Abbas

An Alien at Home

When a Muslim intellectual – reared and educated in a Western country – returns home, he finds himself in an alien land. His way of life and his outlook on the world is not approved by those with whom he has social relations, and more especially by those with whom he lives. In social gatherings, he remains guarded, fearing his views may cause offence. Owing to differences in tastes and convictions, he is virtually treated as a pariah. He cherishes ideas which are anathema to the public. At best, he is viewed as a campaigner of Western liberal thought, culture, and civilization.

During his stay in the West, the intellectual was inspired by the democratic traditions. To his utter chagrin, his country and most of the Islamic World are ruled by authoritarian and oppressive regimes, masquerading as democracy. Contempt for democracy, covert or overt, is rife among the beneficiaries of military dictatorship, sham democracies, mullahs, and politicians who have no chance of winning elections.

The Plight of the Dissenter

Politically motivated charges are framed against advocates of democracy and human rights. The state apparatus is used to intimidate dissidents and activists. Without a fair trial, the courts assign severe punishments to them. In detention, they are denied free access to effective counsel, and facility of proper treatment. They spend long periods in solitary confinement, without permission to read or write. They are not even allowed to phone their relatives.

The intellectual is pained to read news about the treatment meted to dissidents and reformists in the Islamic world. Mohsin al-Awaji, the Saudi scholar, was detained with scores of Islamists and writers during the 1990 for four years for demanding introduction of democratic reforms into the kingdom. For signing a petition calling for constitutional reforms that ensure people's participation via an elected parliament, harsh prison sentences were awarded to three Saudi reformists. Ali al-Demaini, Abdullah al-Hamed and Matrouk al-Faleh were sentenced to nine, seven and six years of imprisonment, respectively.

Ayman Nour, the main challenger to President Hosni Mubarak in the forthcoming election, was jailed on trumped charges of forging signatures on election petitions. He was subjected to ill-treatment and tortured. Likewise, Saad Eddin Ibrahim was sentenced to seven years imprisonment in Egypt for writing about human rights and democracy. Neila Charchour Hachicha, a Tunisian activist, is under police surveillance for speaking at the American Enterprise Institute about the need for democracy.

As freedom of expression is conspicuous by its absence, the intellectual is not free to air his views,

fearing social hostility, which his opinions may provoke. He incurs the wrath of the government if he spreads views contrary to official policy. He also becomes victim of religious fascists if he disseminates views inconsistent with their beliefs. As a consequence, he either conceals his beliefs or suffers persecution and harassment.

To conceal their wrongdoings and crimes, the governments gag their critics by imposing restriction on free speech. Because journalists can mould public opinion, they become a special target of state oppression.

For instance, Iranian journalist Akbar Ganji was arrested in 2000 for implicating leading figures, including former President Hashemi Rafsanjani and former intelligence minister Ali Fallahian, in a series of political killings in 1998. He was also accused of taking part in a conference in Berlin at which political and social reforms in Iran were openly discussed. Because of prison conditions, his health deteriorated. He was sentenced to six years in prison in 2001.

Fawaz Turki, a senior columnist, was unceremoniously fired by Arab News – a leading Saudi-based English newspaper. His criticism of Egyptian leader, Hosni Mubarak, after he clamped down on human rights activists, resulted in his dismissal. Furthermore, his report about the atrocities Indonesia had committed during its occupation of East Timor was considered too outrageous.

As a writer, for harboring liberal and progressive ideas, the intellectual is banned from presenting his work on television, radio or the print media. Writing even on innocuous topics may result in public persecution or prosecution for blasphemy – a crime for which he may be murdered by a mob or sentenced to death.

Fatwas Against Freedom

During his studies, the intellectual embraced the idea that religious freedom is a vital element of democracy. To the contrary, in some Islamic countries, apostasy is a crime punishable by death, in others where law allows conversion, an apostate is murdered by a mob. The recent verdict of an Afghan court proclaiming death sentence to Abdul Rahman, a Christian convert from Islam, is a case in point.

Instigated by a fatwa, religious zealots murdered Farag Foda – a well-known writer, and columnist in Egypt. Before his death, Farag Foda was declared an apostate. His death went unpunished because Mohammad Al-Ghazali, a religious scholar, declared that it was not wrong to kill a foe of Islam. The court followed his view and those who killed Foda were released.

Many people accused of apostasy are not converts at all, but rather Muslims who have questioned fundamentalist interpretation of Islam and called for a

more tolerant approach. For example, the Sudanese Islamic scholar, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, was executed for apostasy in 1985 after he published a leaflet calling for the reform of Islamic law to make it more just and humane.

Slavery

Much to the intellectual's annoyance, slavery still survives in some Muslim countries. The government of Mauritania abolished slavery more than 20 years ago. But despite the government's persistent denials, the practice continues in one form or another. Sudan has a long history of slavery. The slave trade still persists and the lengthy civil war that resumed in 1983 has added a new dimension to the strife. Government backed armed militias raid to capture children and women, who are treated as slaves. They are forced to work in homes and in the fields, punished when they refuse, and abused physically and sometimes sexually.

Although slavery was abolished in Saudi Arabia in 1962, the practice still flourishes there. The intellectual is shocked to learn that ranking Saudi religious authorities sanction slavery. For example, Sheikh Saleh Al-Fawzan, a leading Saudi government cleric asserts that slavery is a part of Islam; slavery is a part of *jihad* and *jihad* will remain as long as there is Islam. The cleric also insists that Muslims who contend that Islam is against slavery are infidels! His religious books are used to teach five million Saudi students, according to Saudi Information Agency.

The intellectual is appalled to see that inhuman punishments, such as stoning to death, amputation of hands, and flogging, continue to remain on the statute books in some Islamic countries. He is shocked to read that a Saudi Arabian court sentenced an Indian migrant worker to have an eye gouged out as punishment for partially blinding a Saudi man in a brawl.

Women and Children

Emancipation of Western women made a profound impression on him. Much to his dismay, the intellectual finds that women are considered inferior in all respects to men: physically, morally, and intellectually. Women are greatly disadvantaged – both legally and socially – and oppressed in Muslim countries. Women struggle to exist in an environment characterized by lack of equal rights and equal opportunities. They are subjected to unfair treatment in matters of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and while appearing as a witness in a court of law. Women are debarred from holding a public, civil, military or ecclesiastical office. They cannot assume the office of the head of the state or judge or lead prayers.

In Saudi Arabia women are forbidden to drive! In some countries, women cannot work, and leave their houses without their fathers' or husbands' permission. Wife beating is quite common, and most men consider it their divine right. The veil is imposed on women in many countries, either legally or under cultural and social pressure.

Child-brides are a common sight because girls are forced to marry at an early age. Girls, who marry before attaining physical and psychological maturity, are more prone to the risks of maternal fatalities, miscarriages, and infant deaths. Given that facilities for obstetric care are inadequate in most of the Islamic countries, teenage mothers suffer to a great extent. The practice of marriage of girls at an early age is strongly supported by the clergy. Children are considered the property of the father with the mother being merely the caretaker. Upon divorce, fathers win custody of boys over the age 7 and girls on the onset of puberty.

Monogamous marriage is the very basis of Western civilization, while polygamy is legalized and socially acceptable in most of the Islamic world. The intellectual is baffled to see that marriage is restricted to the matters of sex and subsistence; somehow ideas of companionship, love and understanding are alien to the Islamic mindset.

Sexual Segregation

Segregation of the sexes is enforced in most of the Islamic countries, legally or under the pressure of the community. In addition to curtailing mobility of women, this practice is causing them numerous handicaps and disabilities: denial of easy access to educational institutions, especially those imparting higher education; curtailment of job opportunities; and debarring women from pursuing a political career. Adherents of gender segregation believe that sexual desire is easily aroused in both sexes if a man is left alone with a woman – unregulated sex can lead to mayhem and disorder. Therefore, a woman must not ride in a car alone with a hired driver, and a female servant should not stay in the house alone if men are present.

A fire at a public school for girls in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, resulted in the death of fourteen girls. Religious police prevented some girls from leaving the burning building because girls were not wearing *abaya* – a black coat worn with a headscarf and a second scarf over the face. The police force also beat firemen who were attempting to enter the building while the students were still inside. Some deaths could have been avoided had the firemen not been stopped by the police, according to the *Saudi Gazette* daily. The watchman refused to open the gate of the building, preventing the girls' exit. To protect their modesty, every public building for Saudi women is guarded by men.

Islamic protesters tried to disrupt a mixed-sex marathon in Pakistan. The government had to deploy thousand of policemen to protect participants of the marathon. BBC reported that some 500 women took part in the race, although 2000 due to run had backed out for fear of violence. The marathon was organized to raise funds for the victims of the earthquake which devastated part of northern Pakistan and Kashmir. Islamic protesters had demanded women be barred from taking part, arguing their presence was against the basic tenets of Islam.

Honour Killings

Honour killings are carried out by men against women in their family for suspected sexual transgression. Even women who have been raped are killed for defiling the family honour. The intellectual is horrified to note that the custom of female genital mutilation is still practiced in African countries, the Middle East, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

In most of the Islamic countries women do not have the right to vote; where the law permits this, male members do not allow them to cast their vote. In Pakistan, the incumbent political party and the opposition contesting an election agree to exclude women from the voting process in some constituencies.

Democracy protects the rights of minorities. The intellectual is dismayed to observe that the rights of minorities enshrined in Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other such covenants are consistently violated in Iran, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. In three countries, the rights of their Bahai, Ahmadi and Shiite minorities have been denied, respectively. The record of other Islamic states in this respect is not very commendable either.

As a teacher, he does not enjoy the intellectual freedom, essential to the proper fulfilment of his function. If he teaches topics such as Darwin's theory of evolution, he is labelled as an infidel or apostate and faces political action by armed groups of religious fanatics, who demand his expulsion from the institution where he is working. Saudi universities are not allowed to teach the theory of evolution.

The intellectual is disturbed on observing that some educational institutions are in the grip of dogmatists, who practically control every aspect of life on the campus. They indoctrinate students and indulge in violent activities, such as intimidation of vice-chancellors, and beating of faculty members and students who oppose their philosophy and resist their hegemonic control.

Art

If he admires art, he is told that all art is immoral except calligraphy. Strong taboos against dance, music, painting, and sculpture infuriate him. Only artists toeing the official line are permitted to present their work on the print and print media. Officially approved art fails to attract his attention. The tendency to jettison pre-Islamic heritage and history, such as ancient Egyptian monuments and artifacts, baffles him.

He reacts with grief and sadness on learning that Afghanistan's Taliban have destroyed two gigantic statues of Buddha at Bamiyan. Carved out of the solid sandy rock in the third century C.E., they were among Asia's great archaeological treasures. The Taliban considered them offensive to Islam and boosters of idolatry. The fatwa of Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa, one of Egypt's highest authorities, declaring that Islam forbids ancient

sculptures, annoys him. His predecessor, Mufti Nasr Farid Wasel, issued a fatwa that forbade beauty pageants.

The Central Dilemma

The central dilemma for the intellectual is this: How can he express his views without being persecuted or punished? How can he reconcile the liberal views he acquired during his stay in the West with the beliefs he inherited from his ancestors?

He survives in hostile surroundings by practicing restraint. Knowing that he cannot bring people around to his point of view by appealing to their reason, the intellectual supports his views with scriptural writings or by modifying Islamic tenets so as to bring them in conformity with modern thought.

He even goes to the extent of presenting un-Islamic ideas as Islamic by invoking the concept of *ijtihad*. Calling for an end to literal readings of Koran, he argues for a new interpretation of the sacred text, which is in harmony with liberal concepts, such as human rights, democracy, equality before law, religious freedom and freedom of speech.

For instance, in an Islamic system, conceived by the clergy, women do not enjoy equal rights and status with men. The intellectual does not reconcile to this belief and in accordance with the thought of his Western mentors declares that Islam guarantees equal rights to the two sexes. Similarly, he justifies polygamy by maintaining that it was intended for the protection of orphans and widows.

He explains slavery by assuming that Islam had adopted a gradual process to eliminate the institution because of social conditions prevalent in Arabia at that time. An immediate order of prohibition would have created immense social and economic problems. He mentions steps prescribed by Islam for the welfare of slaves which would, in his opinion, result in eventual elimination of the evil: appeal to the Muslims to liberate as many slaves as they could and to treat slaves in a just and humane manner; for the atonement of many sins manumission of slaves was divinely ordained. Despite all these commands, slavery has survived in the Muslim world.

According to all the traditional sects of Islam, apostasy is punishable by death, but the intellectual argues that Koran does not prescribe any punishment for renunciation of faith. Declaring them as illiterate, he challenges the authority of the clergy.

However, the clergy, schooled in the essentials of Koran and *Hadith*, support their claim with stronger religious evidence than the Western educated intellectual.

Such, alas, is the plight of the Muslim intellectual!

Dr. Hasan Abbas is a physician, Humanist and writer.

Radical Islam and Freedom of Expression in Europe

Roy W Brown

The rise of radical Islam poses a threat to freedom of expression and the implications for Europe's traditional rights and freedoms are dire. Roy Brown examines the issues involved.

Introduction

Radical Islam is by no means the only source of challenge to freedom of expression in the modern world. There are others, for example: misguided government policies, authoritarian and corrupt regimes, the concentration of media ownership, commercial pressures, and self-censorship in the face of threats and violence. In a short paper however it is not possible to do more than simply mention that these other threats exist.

Our Changing World

Our human rights and freedoms are now recognised as the basis of Western secular society. It wasn't always so. 400 years ago, Europe was riven by wars of religion. Religion within a territory was uniform: imposed and enforced by the state. Torture and death awaited those who were accused of witchcraft, blasphemy, heresy or atheism. We arrived at our present state of tolerance and freedom through long years of struggle by our forebears.

By the early 20th century we had won the battle for freedom of speech based on the philosophy and arguments of Voltaire, John Stewart Mill, GW Foote and others. But the Second World War and the revelation of the genocidal consequences of Nazi racism led to revulsion across the Western world, and the realisation that freedom of speech could go too far in inciting hatred of minorities. The rights of minorities became the frontline in the battle for human rights and freedom itself.

The other important change at that time was recognition of the individual, rather than the group, as the rightful repository of rights and freedoms. This view was enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and the International Bill of Rights. This change has had a dramatic effect in transforming society for the better, allowing individual development and fulfilment, and helping eliminate the last vestiges of class privilege.

The Holocaust showed the world that the persecution of minorities can have appalling consequences, and the lesson was well-learned. The past 60 years have seen an historic transformation in Western society. In the United States the civil rights movement achieved the almost total integration of African Americans into mainstream society; in South Africa, decades of oppression came to an end with the abandonment of apartheid; and despite lingering opposition from religious zealots, gays and lesbians have achieved a semblance of equality in the West.

The West has become highly sensitive to the rights of minorities.

Radical Islam rejects the Western way of life as decadent, and fails to appreciate the universal values of individual freedom and autonomy, democracy and social responsibility

The new Europe

Immigration into Europe from the developing world has been accelerating. According to the International Herald Tribune (9 June 2006), the number of foreign-born workers in Spain increased six-fold from 1994 to 2004. In Italy in the same period the number increased four-fold. Much of this immigration has been from North Africa where, according to the

Population Reference Bureau, the population stood at 193 million in 2005 and was still growing by more than 4 million per year. So immigration pressure is likely to remain high for the foreseeable future. The great majority of these immigrants are Muslims.

Demographers are predicting that the combined effect of immigration and the high birth rates common in immigrant communities will lead to many of Europe's cities having Muslim majority populations by 2050.

Muslims come to Europe in search of a better life, some to escape from tyranny or oppression at home, others simply for greater economic opportunity. But government policies of multiculturalism have meant that immigrants have not been encouraged to integrate into mainstream European society, and the special needs of these communities have been neglected. As a result, youth unemployment in many of Europe's inner cities has reached levels of 40% or more, and many young immigrants feel alienated from the rest of society.

Radical Islam

Into this vacuum has come radical Islam, a well-funded, well-organised fundamentalist creed that provides a new, strong sense of identity for many young Muslims. Radical Islam has its own clear agenda: the eventual submission of the entire world to Islam. To achieve this it must separate Muslim society from the rest, promoting the idea of the "Muslim exception". It rejects Western values as having nothing to teach Muslims: the only decent life is submission to the will of Allah – as expounded by the radical imams and mullahs. It is a totalitarian creed, completely at odds with the real needs of Muslims.

Radical Islam eschews all friendship between Muslims and non-Muslims, creating a ghetto mindset in its followers and denying them the contact and skills they need to fully develop as citizens. It has promoted the notion that all of the ills of the Islamic world are the fault of Western greed and duplicity. It rejects the Western way of life as decadent, and fails to appreciate the universal values of individual freedom and autonomy, democracy and social responsibility on which Western civilisation is based. Radical Islam has betrayed an entire generation of young Muslims.

This totalitarian creed is being preached and taught in Islamic schools and mosques across Europe by organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, which

advocates the creation of Islamic government, and whose slogan includes the phrase: "...death for the sake of Allah is the loftiest of its wishes". The Brotherhood reportedly controls around 25% of the mosques in France and is growing in influence in many other European countries. We all need fellowship, but the Islamic extremists have perverted this basic human need in the name of their uncompromising creed.

Meanwhile, any criticism of the extremists is met with cries of "Islampohobia" – a highly effective method of demonising their opponents by confusing criticism of Islamic extremism with hatred of Muslims. These are not at all the same thing. As the Quranic scholar Hassan Fatemolla has said "Muslims are the first victims of Islamic extremism".

By encouraging young Muslims to close ranks and distance themselves from the rest of society, the Islamists are doing young Muslims a terrible wrong.

Meanwhile, our newfound sensitivity to the rights of minorities has left governments and the media at a loss to know how to react. "We cannot interfere" seems to be the mantra. And as a result, governments are leaving these young people to their fate. We have failed to recognise the difference between the demands of the Islamists and the needs of our Muslim fellow-citizens. Here are two recent quotes from Muslim Londoners:

"I'm tired of certain bodies i.e Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) making statements in my name. I didn't elect them."
Imran, London

"... it's like a dictatorship that is appointed over the Muslim community. And it's the government that helps these kind of organisations replicate dictatorial political cultures from abroad here in the UK. They don't represent us, and the police should be talking to us Muslims through our local elected councillors and not tin-pot imams, mosques or the MCB. That's what destroys the relationship, particularly amongst those of us born in the UK. Why should we be talked to differently to the rest of Britain?" Surayya Khan, London

Radical Islam is well organised and well funded. Saudi Arabia is known to have poured billions of dollars into the creation of a worldwide network of madrassas (Quranic schools), centres of Islamic studies, charities, information centres, sharia councils, Muslim parliaments, newspapers, training programs, as well as support for imams, mullahs, seminars and conferences. Most, if not all of this funding is spent on the promotion of their radical agenda, based on a literal interpretation of the Quran. In some parts of the world the radical indoctrination and rote learning provided by Saudi-funded madrassas is the only education many young Muslims ever receive. It is hard to imagine an education less well suited to helping them adapt to modern life, or less likely to provide them with the skills they need to compete in the modern world.

The Threat to Freedom of Expression

The violent reaction across the Muslim world to the publication of the Danish cartoons provided a chilling example of just how powerful radical Islam has become.

Any criticism of the extremists is met with cries of "Islampohobia" – a highly effective method of demonising their opponents by confusing criticism of Islamic extremism with hatred of Muslims.

I am sure I don't need to rehearse what happened. Flemming Rose, cultural editor of Jyllands-Posten said: "When I visit a mosque, I show my respect by taking off my shoes. I follow the customs, just as I do in a church, synagogue or other holy place. But if a believer demands that I, as a non-believer, observe his taboos in the public domain, he is not asking for my respect, but for my submission..."

No doubt the cartoons were hurtful to the feelings of many Muslims. But the purpose of the protests was clear. It was an attack on the newspaper – and on Denmark – for daring to publish something of which the Islamists did not approve. In no sense, however, could the publication of the cartoons be considered incitement to hatred of Muslims. Last week the city court in Aarhus agreed, stating that there was "insufficient proof that the cartoons were intended to be insulting or harmful to Muslims". But what was worrying was the statement which followed: "... there is no sufficient reason to assume that the cartoons are or were intended to be insulting ... or put forward ideas that could hurt the standing of Muslims in society." Does this now mean that if I criticise Islam, that is "putting forward ideas that could hurt the standing of Muslims in society" I can be sued? It seems that Denmark now has a blasphemy law.

Just how this might be interpreted in future can be seen from the comments of Ahmed Abu Laban, a Copenhagen imam, who said: "Danish journalists should exercise self-censorship when reporting sensitive topics" He said he hoped Denmark would pass laws "guaranteeing the dignity of people". But this is a trap. It is not an insult to Muslims to insult Islam. Muslims are people, Islam is a religion. The two are distinct. It is the *believer* that needs the protection of the law, not the *belief*. The Islamists have set out to confuse the two in the public mind. If they succeed, medieval laws against blasphemy will have returned under another name.

Islamic laws and Islamic taboos do not, should and must not be allowed to apply to non-Muslims.

People have human rights, religions and ideas do not.

My final point on this issue is this. Calls by Muslim, Christian and other religious leaders at the UN, at the European Commission and in national governments to provide protection for religion are misplaced. People have human rights, religions and ideas do not. When ideas and beliefs can no longer be challenged, human progress will grind to a halt.

Why Freedom of Expression Matters

Freedom of expression is not absolute. Governments will always prohibit certain types of expression such as incitement to violence, threats to public order etc. And the civil courts will provide redress for those whose reputations have been unfairly damaged. But restrictions on freedom of expression should be the exception rather than the rule.

The price I pay for my freedom of expression is your right to yours, even if you offend me. We are all entitled to our beliefs, but no-one has the right to impose their beliefs, customs and taboos on others.

Freedom of expression is, uniquely, that freedom which enables us to defend all our other rights and freedoms. Without freedom of expression and freedom of the press how are we even to know about, far less expose tyranny, corruption, incompetence, injustice and oppression?

But even without legal sanctions, freedom of expression can sometimes be limited by social pressure, so that it becomes difficult to speak openly of sensitive issues. What may start as a well-meaning attempt to promote sensitivity and tolerance can lead to political correctness and the suppression of free speech.

How is a tolerant society to deal with an intolerant minority bent on subverting that tolerance? If Western society were intolerant the problem would not arise, but it is precisely because we are tolerant that we are vulnerable. The challenge is to preserve the freedoms we have won while learning to protect them. But right now this doesn't seem to be happening.

In June, the Danish Minister for Church Affairs Bertel Haarder found his name on an "official enemies" list issued by The Islamic Faith Community, and he admitted that he no longer dared speak his mind for fear of having to live under police protection. Since the cartoons affair, Denmark may fairly be described as a place where *not even members of the government* dare speak freely for fear of being killed.

In Conclusion

Freedom of expression in the West is under sustained attack from radical Islam. Joining in the attack are the opportunistic leaders of some other religions, and

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politicians and cultural leaders misled by the shrill voices of the Islamists. All are calling for limits to freedom of expression on the grounds of religious freedom.

To weaken freedom of expression is to weaken our ability to expose injustice and oppression. Yet self-censorship has been at work in the Western press ever since the murder of Theo van Gogh. Without press freedom how will we ever know about, far less expose tyranny, corruption and injustice?

To understand what lies in store if we do not defend this freedom, we need look

no further than the 2005 World Press Freedom Index. Of the 167 states in the index, Denmark stands proudly at the top alongside six other West European countries.

Not one of the world's 56 Islamic states is in the top half of the table. The highest-ranking Islamic state is Kuwait in 85th position. Turkey stands at 98, the Sudan is at 133, Egypt at 143, and Pakistan at 150. Saudi Arabia, guardian of the Islamic holy places and paymasters to radical Islam, stands miserably in 154th place. These states are in good company. Down there with them sit China, Cuba, Zimbabwe and North Korea. And virtually at the bottom of the Press Freedom Index, in 164th place out of 167, stands Iran – for the past 27 years the model Islamic state. That is the kind of society you create when your laws are defined by the Islamists.

Of course, correlation does not demonstrate cause, but I think the message is clear. The West can remain free, safeguarding the right to freedom of expression as the guarantor of all our other rights and freedoms, or it can allow itself to submit to the demands of radical Islam. It cannot do both.

This is the text of Roy Brown's paper presented at the Seminar: Islam in Europe at the Baltic Humanist Conference, Stockholm Institute of Education, Sweden.

Towards a New Enlightenment for Africa

1st International Secular Conference in Francophone Africa – 17, 18 and 19 January 2007

Inauguration and 1st day of Conference at University of Yaounde
2nd and 3rd day at Classic High School, Ebolowa town

Confirmed speakers include Dan Barker, Leo Igwe, Babu Gogineni, Bobbie Kirkhart, Xavier Yav, Josh Kutchinsky, Ginette Ashkenazy, Schreiber and Taslima Nasrin.

Interesting post conference tours, including a visit to the Pygmy homeland as well as a visit to King Njoya Palace to greet him and his people.

For details, and to register:

Mbom Pierre Alex
Conference Coordinator
Phone: 00237/554 9706
E Mail cfreethoughtassociation@yahoo.fr

For travel advice, maps, and a brief introduction to Cameroon, visit

<http://www.vilaron.homechoice.co.uk/brightidea.htm>

Belgian Freethinkers at 35

Unie Vrijzinnige Verenigingen (UVV), the Flemish umbrella organisation for Humanism in Belgium, is celebrating its 35th year this year. A report on some of the achievements of this IHEU Member Organisation.



Unie Vrijzinnige Verenigingen was founded on the 31st of March 1971 as a non-profit organisation. Unie Vrijzinnige Verenigingen wanted to offer a sympathetic ear to anyone who needed one and as such focused much of its attention on achieving this goal. UVV wanted to lay the foundations for moral assistance and for the creation of moral counsellors who would be at the service of the entire population. Counsellors would be readily available for anyone wanting to talk to them, or for anyone wanting to consult with them for help with different problems.

Other recognized religions and life stance organisations philosophies could already count on a professional staff that could handle this task, and this was funded by the state. It was only logical that the government should extend this possibility to the non-confessional lifescape represented by the UVV in the Flemish-speaking part of the country.

Soon after the creation of UVV, the Centraal Vrijzinnige Raad (CVR) came into existence (on the 14th of July, 1972). The CVR which is made of the Flemish UVV and its French-speaking Walloon sister organisation, the Centre d'Action Laïque, was founded to represent and coordinate organised Humanism at the national level. The CVR was of the utmost importance in the struggle for equal rights for free-thinkers in Belgium and Belgian Humanism succeeded in obtaining state support for its activities.

On 1st November 1981, 6 moral councillors were hired. Steps were also initiated to guarantee provision of Humanist moral counselling services across the Flemish territory and in the capital city of Brussels. By the beginning of 1983 the first moral consultants started working in the Centres for Moral Assistance (CMD) of Laeken, Ghent, Hasselt, Antwerp, Bruges and Leuven. Each CMD could also count on one staff member to lend practical support to the moral counsellors. UVV's moral counsellors enjoyed a great deal of independence

at this time to enable them to evolve specific approaches in their respective field of activity.

In the 1980's the concept of moral assistance was fleshed out and defined more clearly: moral counselling now encompassed all activities concerning moral assistance and aid, all activities that gave meaning to life from a humanistic perspective that could benefit the freethinker community.

Unie Vrijzinnige Verenigingen also campaigned on behalf of various ethical issues such as the retraction of abortion and euthanasia from the Belgian penal code. The organisation supported the possibility of marriage and of adoption for homosexuals. The fight against the extreme right wing of Belgian politics has always been one of its central ideas.

In 1998, six provincial centres for moral assistance were founded. They were located in each of the capitals of Flemish provinces and in Brussels. These centres fulfilled a coordinating role for the Flemish freethinker community.

A key moment in the history of Unie Vrijzinnige Verenigingen was the promulgation of a law concerning the organisation of the non-confessional lifescape in Belgium. Promulgated on International Humanist Day, this 21st June 2002 law defines the entire functioning of the Centraal Vrijzinnige Raad (Unie Vrijzinnige Verenigingen and Centre d'Action Laïque): its structure, its functioning, its financial organisation etc.

To clearly define the tasks of organised freethinkers in the future, a scientific research was performed in 2005 by the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, the only Flemish University that has incorporated the principle of 'free inquiry' in its statutes. The results of the research help the Unie Vrijzinnige Verenigingen steer its policy in a better way.

Unie Vrijzinnige Verenigingen faces some very important challenges: the first phase of the development of UVV has to be concluded. A think tank has been established to prepare for the second phase. It's very important that UVV creates and maintains a distinct profile for itself.

A lot has been achieved already, but clearly, there's still lots more to be done...

Sofie Sfingopoulos and Klaas Nijls are Staff Members of Unie Vrijzinnige Verenigingen.

Ours is an evangelical culture. So many people convinced that they've been saved by Jesus, cured by homoeopathy or the laying on of hands, abducted by aliens or protected by angels seek public acknowledgement that their convictions are true. Imbued with messianic fervour, or simply seeking

'validation', they are not content to hoard the truth; they are compelled to share it and convert the unenlightened, relying on the force of their own intense emotions. Generally, the only proof offered for a fantastic belief is the passion it inspires.

Wendy Kaminer

For a Secular Europe

Jenoff van Hulle

On 23 and 24 June 2006 the European Humanist Federation held a symposium and a General Assembly. Goal of the meeting: to strive for a secular Europe. Jenoff van Hulle reports.

Symposium

What was once the scene of the cruel dictatorship of the extreme right *generalísimo* Francisco Franco, is now a quiet village. Tourists sauntering peacefully in search of some shade, or sluggishly sipping at a *Granizado de limon*. The air conditioning locked in a heavy battle with the shimmering warmth of the sun. Technology and nature flatly opposed to each other. The height of modernity.

Or is it? In the tiny little streets of Toledo, time seems to have made a U-turn. Muslims, Jews and Christians lived here together for centuries and left behind indelible tracks in the streets, monuments and buildings of the capital of Castilla-La-Mancha. A sense of fraternity amongst the three monotheistic religions. If not for the many swords and combat equipment in the local tourist shops of Toledo that reminded me of the numerous bloody conflicts, fought in the name of God and that are being fought even now in the name of God, I would have believed that religions could coexist peacefully under God's benevolent gaze.

So, the battle and the struggle of Humanists for a secular society is not an anachronism, nor was the organisation of a symposium on the 23rd of June on the *Promotion of secularism in Spain, Europe and in the EU*.

At this symposium J. F. Baron, president of Europa Laica and R. Gallego, president of Granada Laica talked about the situation in Spain. David Pollock, trustee of the British Humanist Association explained how to organise lobbying on European questions, P. T. Nagy gave an overview of the secularisation in post-communist Hungary and J. M. Ducomte talked about the discrimination of non-believers.

General Assembly

On the 24th of June the European Humanist Federation organised its General Assembly. The main issue of the day was the difficult question: how to organise a peaceful inter-cultural and inter-lifescence society? Difficult, as in reality religion and politics seem to seek each other's company more and more. Besides that, the members of the European Humanist Federation elected a new board: David Pollock (President), Rob Buitenweg (first vice-president), Julien Houben (second vice-president), Suzy Mommaerts (Treasurer), Georges Liénard (Secretary-General), Marianne Marchand, Werner Schultz, Luc Devuyt, Jean-Michel Ducomte, Baard Thalberg and Tryntsje De Groot (members).

The message delivered by the new President at the first meeting of the Board of Directors was quite clear as regards the much-needed mission of the European Humanist Federation: *The European Humanist Federation has to represent and stand up for the godless in Europe and to resist the encroachment by religious moralisers who seek to impose their values on us by law or by force. Moreover the European Humanist Federation has to maintain and promote our shared positive values and beliefs, and it is our task to ensure that those who govern us, and society at large, give us the respect in real life that the European Convention of Human Rights guarantees us in theory – equal standing and protection with religion.*

Jenoff Van Hulle is International Relations Officer of the European Humanist Federation



David Pollock new President of EHF

EHF at OSCE Human Rights Conference in Warsaw, Poland

For the second time, three EHF representatives (Vera Pegna, Suzy Mommaerts and David Pollock) took an active part in the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw (October 2-13).

This annual meeting is open to non-governmental organisations, and EHF was present along with a hundred or more NGOs. We were among representatives of 50-60 governments and representatives of international bodies such as the Council of Europe.

We ran a successful side-meeting on *Equality for Non-Believers and Believers* and made two interventions in plenary sessions, drawing attention to the failure to give non-believers equal rights even in states that otherwise had good records on human rights and equality. Several people welcomed our contributions – we were, 'a breath

of fresh air' after so many religious contributions. The Holy See attended as a member state, and its representative made predictable interventions deploring relativism and the mockery of religion. We spoke also at other side-meetings, including one arranged by the OSCE Religious Advisory Panel about the Danish cartoons affair and rulings in court cases over wearing of religious dress and another on Christianophobia, when a weak case was put forward by the speakers and most questions were sceptical or hostile.

We took advantage of the opportunity to make friends with some other NGOs and some of the OSCE officials, and we also spoke to some of the government representatives, in particular of Spain and Finland, who will preside over OSCE in the next two years. All in all, we made a small but useful impact.

Civil Society Forum (EMPOWER) in Bergamo, Italy

A Forum was organised under the High Patronage of the President of the Italian Republic and the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, in the framework of the consultation on the White Paper on a European Communication Policy.

EMPOWER brought together 300 senior representatives of civil society and NGOs from 25 Member States, Bulgaria, and Romania.

The aim of the Forum was to provide the European Commission with concrete proposals on how to promote a European public space where citizens are better informed and engaged in EU policies and in the debate on the future of Europe.

The debate were articulated in plenary and parallel sessions, with the concluding remarks by the European Commission's Vice President Margot Wallström.

As follow up of EMPOWER, the European Commission will publish on its website all the contributions presented in Bergamo and will take them into account when drafting the final report on the consultation, to be submitted to the European Parliament.

EHF general secretary presented a paper entitled "To promote a European public space" in the parallel session "Network Europe, connecting citizens to each other." The paper presented some considerations based on EHF position on participative democracy, considering that participation of "representative" NGOs may be a tool for developing democracy in the EU. The paper stressed:

- the need for a European legitimacy for euro NGOs
- the need to find criteria for determining that NGOs to be 'recognised' are representative of citizens' opinions
- that no special channel be given to Churches
- dialogue between civil society and elected European representatives (Euro Parliamentarians)
- that the history of European countries be revisited in order to eliminate nationalist presentation

Two fruitful activities that put Humanism higher on the international agenda.

David Pollock (President) and Georges Liénard (Secretary-General), European Humanist Federation)

Advance Notice Humanist Youth Summer School, 2007

Location:

In the Baltic Sea Region. (Northern Poland, Southern Finland, North-Eastern Germany, Eastern Denmark, South- or Middle-Sweden).

Participants:

30 to 80 young people between the age of 15 and 26 (Camp-leaders of the age up to 45) from Humanist Associations from The Baltic Republics, Poland, Germany, Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Iceland.

Camp-language:

English. All camp-leaders should have a very good command of the English language.

Duration:

The Camp will take part in summer 2007. A two-week-period in August 2007 is proposed.

Theme:

The central theme is "Humanist Youth Work in Europe" and will cover Civil Confirmations, Youth travel, Gender aspects of Youth work, Humanist Youth Work and the School system.

Leisure:

Plenty. The camp site is proposed to be near a swimming pool. Ample opportunity for basketball, canoeing or basket work!

Hosting:

Bungalows or a large house for self-supporters.

Interested?

Those interested in organising or in participating, contact Gregor Ziese-Henatsch in Berlin at ziese.henatsch@t-online.de

Critical Thinking for the World

5th IHEYO Conference in Vijayawada, India

Truly International

You could hear the sound of a maddal drum, coming from the roof of the house. A mixture of Nepalese voices, laughter and noise wafted in from the late night celebrations. The ambience was magic and this was all happening at the Atheist Centre in Vijayawada where 43 young people from 11 different countries (four continents) came together to fill the night with international music, native dresses, traditional food and mirth.

It was the 5th IHEYO Conference. Young trainers and teachers from a humanistic background came together to work on the theme "Critical Thinking and Free Inquiry in Education" for one week. They organised and participated in workshops and seminars. They listened to speeches, took part in discussions – or just exchanged ideas with other young and active Humanists. Importantly, there was a fruitful exchange of various teaching practices, pedagogical methods, and new ideas were developed. There was opportunity to make new contacts, to learn new skills, and to gain a variety of experiences. All were exposed to the different skills required for teaching critical thinking.

The formal content of the conference was mixed with learning about the successful approach of the Atheist Centre which works for social equality and human rights. The Atheist Centre is involved in many secular activities in the field of social work, and promotes social change in a non-violent way.

Part of the tough conference schedule was also a field visit to one of the campuses of the Atheist Centre to visit projects being implemented by the Center. Here they are taking care of villages in rural areas which were either destroyed by natural disasters or were suffering from underdeveloped infrastructures – there is no water, no electric power and no local schools. In many of the villages Arthik Samata Mandali (ASM), one of the big



Lars-Petter Helgestad from Norway is IHEYO's new President



IHEYO Conference Participants

projects of Atheist Centre, has been working for several years with steady success. Change takes time.

A Mile Stone

This Conference was also a milestone for international youth Humanism as it was the first time that a conference was organised with so many leaders, trainers and teachers with a humanistic background.

The Conference was a platform for an international exchange between rational, atheist, sceptical and humanist young people. Humanism means living in an atheist and responsible way based on rational thinking. Critical Thinking is one of the most important foundations of a person's autonomy. There are still lots of conflicts around the world, traditional ignorant behaviour through religious belief and violence that tramples upon human rights. Critical thinking is relevant to promote tolerance and help decrease prejudices. This exchange is at least good for an ongoing development in every country.

An international meeting like this is more than just an official conference as it awakens interest in, and an understanding for, other cultures, and it strengthens the foundations on which Humanism is built.

Silvana Uhlich is 2nd Vice-President of IHEYO

6th World Atheist Conference

5, 6 & 7 January, 2007

Atheist Centre, Vijayawada, A.P., INDIA

"The Necessity of Atheism"

Levi Fragell, Sonja Eggerickx, Dr. Veeramani, Roy Brown, Volker Mueller, Dr. P.M. Bhargava, Jim Herrick, Bill Cooke, Kjartan Selnes, Lavanam, Dr. Narendra Nayak, G.V.K. Asan, Prof. Dhaneswar Sahoo and many others will speak.

Three day simple accommodation and food at the Atheist Centre

Registration fee 150 US Dollars

Further details from **Dr. Vijayam, Executive Director**

ATHEIST CENTRE, Benz Circle, Vijayawada 520010, A.P., India.

Phone +91 866 2472330, Fax: +91 866 2484850, Email: atheistcentre@yahoo.com

Scandal in “God’s Own Country”

Babu Gogineni

The popular image of Kerala is that it is a progressive and modern state. But its government recently reiterated its support for the ban on entry of young women to Lord Ayyappa’s temple on Sabarimala Hill. The developments in Kerala moved the legislature of neighbouring Karnataka state to protest, but it has left the pathetically backward leaders of the Travancore Devaswom Board unmoved. How long can this egregious violation of the fundamental rights of women be tolerated, asks Babu Gogineni.

Men in Black

In 2003 there was a fire mishap in Kerala’s Sabarimala temple complex, and during a Sreeboothabali ritualistic procession in 2004 the temple elephant rejected *thidampu*, a replica of the Lord’s idol. Moreover, the conduct of temple affairs was not smooth in recent years. Could it be that the Lord was unhappy with the temple authorities and His devotees? The Travancore Devaswom Board which is charged with controlling and administering the temple’s affairs decided to find out, and appointed a ten member team of ‘experts’ to investigate. Held once every 12 years, the *Ashtamangala Devaprasnam* at Sabarimala’s Lord Ayyappa temple in Kerala is an ‘astrological procedure’ to ascertain Lord Ayyappa’s opinion as regards the temple’s affairs.

Lord Ayyappa’s temple at Sabarimala, situated at a height of nearly 1000 meters above sea level in the picturesque Western Ghats, is one of India’s most important temples and receives an impressive 40 million pilgrims annually. In fact, while the autonomous Devaswom Board administers 1194 temples in Kerala, of its total annual revenue of Rupees 1000 million, Rupees 690 million come from the Sabarimala Temple alone, even though the temple is open for less than four months in a year. Much of the temple’s revenue is from offerings by male devotees and sale of *prasadam* (holy food) to those who throng the hills during the pilgrimage season of November – January every year. The pilgrims are easily recognisable as they are dressed in spartan black. They reach the temple after 41 days of penance and 18 observances which include cold water baths, vegetarian food, abstinence from cigarettes, alcohol and sex, wearing of rudraksha beads, walking bare foot, sleeping on a straw mat. They are also not supposed to shave or have their hair cut during this period.

During these 41 days the pilgrims attempt to discard their identity, address each other only as ‘Swamy’, and chant *Swamiye Saranam Ayyappa* (Lord Ayyappa! I Come to Thee For Refuge!). They come to the temple carrying a small sack called *irumudi* which contains rice, coconuts, sacred ash and various herbs.

The Sabarimala pilgrimage has a significant impact on Kerala’s economy: the Devaswom Board estimated several years ago that the pilgrims who come from various parts of South India generated an incredible Rs. 30,000 million (USD 600 million) worth of commercial activity annually. Pilgrims come from Andhra Pradesh (31%), Tamil Nadu (27%), Kerala (26%), Karnataka (15%) and the remaining 1 percent come from other states. Each pilgrim stayed an average of two weeks in Kerala.

In view of the importance of the temple, it is easy to understand why several eyes were on the happenings at the temple and on the results of the *Ashtamangala Devaprasnam*.

Reading the Betel Leaves

The ten ‘experts’ were led by the ‘renowned’ astrologer and scholar Parappanangadi Unnikrishna Panicker who had previously led such teams at other important temples like Tirupati’s Venkateswara Swamy temple, Palani’s Sree Velayudhaswami temple and Thrissur’s Vadakkumnathan temple. Panicker began a detailed examination of the *thambhoolam* (betel leaves) offered at the beginning of the tantric ritual, and claimed he and his team received “unbelievably concrete signals” that the Lord was angry with various matters ranging from improper conduct of rituals to serious violations of temple traditions.

The astrologers informed the general public that Lord Ayyappa was cross with the *tantris* (Chief priests) who have deviated from their ordained responsibilities and that the Lord gave ominous indications that if matters remained as they were, the *tantris*’ families would face serious consequences. Lord Ayyappa also expressed his displeasure at the bad quality of *nivedyam* (sacred offerings), the rapid shrinking of the temple’s forest cover from over 800 acres to the present 65 acres, and the several constructions in the temple’s vicinity. The Lord objected to the use of electricity to melt *ghee* (clarified butter) inside the *sreekovil* (sanctum sanctorum); and to the fact that instead of a dip in the *bhasma kulam* (the temple pond), priests were taking showers, and anointing the Lord with chlorinated water. Ayyappa was angry that the timing of the annual festival was changed without conducting the *Naveekarana-kalasam* ceremony. The Lord was upset that that there was a High Court case against a Petta Thullal ritual in the temple and desired an amicable resolution.

Still speaking for the Lord, the team of ‘experts’ recommended that flower garlands meant for the deity should be made in the temple premises itself and that garlands made outside should not be used inside the sanctum sanctorum. The Lord’s attention to detail would impress any one – through the experts He recommended that flowers be properly disposed of in a pit meant exclusively for that purpose; that all devotees be given *annadaanam* (free food), and that a bathing pond be dug exclusively for the *tantri*, *melsanthi* and other priests in Sabarimala.

The Lord also revealed his considerable administrative and managerial insight when he gave additional instructions as regards the conduct of temple affairs. Ayyappa also admonished the priests to prepare a code that clearly defined the duties and responsibilities of the *tantri* and *melsanthi* at the temple so that there would be no conflicts in the performance of rituals. The Lord also insisted that the bare-footed police personnel on Sabarimala duty – specially the ones who were posted on the gold-plated *pathinettampady* (18-steps, signifying the five *indriyas* senses, 8 *ragas* of music, and 3 *gunas* or qualities) leading to the sanctum sanctorum – be Ayyappa devotees who observe strict penance.

Divine Sensitivity

Perhaps being sensitive to the issue of contempt of Court, the Lord did not comment on the appointment of a Special Officer by the High Court – in the light of past bickerings between various departments in Sabarimala temple – to oversee and monitor the happenings at Sabarimala. It seems that the Lord also had no comment on the Kerala High Court’s recent orders abolishing the special VIP queue at the sanctum sanctorum so that His ordinary devotees too would be able to have a clear glimpse of him. The Lord, it seems, left to the Division Bench of the Kerala High Court the task of ensuring safety for the pilgrims: the High Court Bench directed on 20 Dec 2005 that the Special Officer in charge of the security arrangements take appropriate steps at Sabarimala to ensure security and safety – after all 53 persons died in a stampede in 1999 because of lax security arrangements. Surprisingly, He made no comments to the astrologers about the loss of His own that year.

It seems that not having anymore the patience to micro-manage his affairs, the Lord left to the division bench comprising of Justices R. Bhaskaran and M. Sasidharan Nambair the task of ensuring that the bananas used for the preparation of *Appam* at the temple was as per the ratio fixed by the Court. The Lord also spoke through the Court, it seems, when the Court ordered that no young women be allowed to conduct un-authorized business along the path taken by pilgrims from the river Pampa to the temple.

Scent of a Woman

The most sensational in the Lord’s revelations was, however, his distress that his idol was defiled by the touch of a young woman. As is well known, Lord Ayyappa, one of three Saiva deities, along with Ganesa and Muruga, is a celibate and shunned the company of women. There are many legends associated with Ayyappa and his physical prowess, but everyone knows that he is the child of two ‘males’; Lord Vishnu who takes the *avatar* of the seductress Mohini to seduce Lord Shiva. The product of their union, Ayyappa has always remained a bachelor and has decreed that no woman of fertile age can visit his temple. So when Panicker revealed what the Lord had told him, all were horrified – the temple authorities denied the possibility of this happening since there were four tiers of security filters which would prevent the entry of women. Panicker then shared with the media his view that the *tantris* may find it difficult to accept his conclusions because he was a ‘non-Brahmin’.

Why did the Lord not reveal his displeasure at the last *Devaprasnam* in 1994? Why did He wait till his astrologer and medium received a confessional fax, asked the better informed – Panicker did not disclose that he in fact was earlier sent a fax from a god-fearing woman in Karnataka state. This was Jayamala who admitted to involuntarily touching the idol in 1987 when pushed by a crowd during her visit to the temple as a 27 year old woman. She went there along with her ailing husband to pray for his health. The prayers do not appear to have helped her husband who died soon after. Even after 18 years she still regretted going to the temple and hence the fax. Panicker of course denied seeing the fax and expressed ignorance of its English language contents.

The orthodox religious mind sneers at the concept of human dignity and hides itself between spurious claims of freedom of religion.

It seems that he came to know of this incident only through reading the betel leaves.

The once-famous-for-investigative-journalism Indian Express reported on 28 June 2006: “In what would remain as a permanent blot on the sanctity of the Sabarimala temple, Kannada actor-producer

Jaimala on Tuesday confessed that she had entered the sanctum sanctorum of the hill shrine and touched the feet of the Ayyappa idol in 1987 ... The Travancore Devaswom Board, however, kept mum about the shameful incident that happened with the alleged connivance of the Thantri who presided over the monthly *pooja*”.

While the simple minded wondered what was shameful about a human being entering the temple of the God she adored, it was revealed that another actress Sudha Chandran had visited the temple’s sanctum in 1986 when she danced at the temple – and that the High Court had fined her! Again, the simple minded would normally expect courts to uphold the fundamental rights of citizens, which include the right not to be discriminated against, as well as the right to worship. Yet another actress Girija Lokesh too revealed that she was at the temple in 1986 along with her young daughter and mother. As the debate gathered momentum, Karnataka State Assembly unanimously criticized the Kerala State for its practices and vowed to protect Jayamala (who hails from Karnataka), from any eventual prosecution. S.S. Patil, a legislator said the practice at Sabarimala was an “insult to the entire womenfolk and nothing but practising untouchability.”

Kerala’s Communists Take a Stand

The Travancore Devaswom Board now undertook a foolishly proactive stance: it dispatched its Superintendent of Police to question Jayamala over the incident, preparing to prosecute the actress for defiling the temple, and readying to file charges of criminal trespass. The temple also intends to conduct purificatory rituals over the next two years and it is estimated that it will cost Rs. 20 million.

Kerala’s Communist government is never one to disappoint the card carrying rationalist. When asked in the State Assembly whether the practice of not allowing women in the Sabarimala temple did not amount to gender discrimination, Cooperative and Devaswom (Endowments) Minister Sudhakaran declared that the government did not intend to interfere with the centuries old customs of the temple and said that it was for the Devaswom Board to take a decision in these matters. He went further and ascribed the confession of Jayamala to the work of a mafia intent on harming Kerala’s interests.

This stand should surprise no one, for several years ago when our colleague and rationalist activist Srini Pattathanam (currently secretary of the Kerala branch of Rationalist Association of India) exposed fraudulent miracle claims at Sabarimala, he and his colleagues were beaten black and blue by the police. Srini Pattathanam caught redhanded the employees of the Kerala State Electricity Department while they were lighting the so-called divine light *Makara Vilakku* that appears across the temple on the Ponnambalamedu hill. In fact most pilgrims time their arrival in Sabarimala to witness this ‘divine light’ which appears thrice on 14 January. After the fraud was exposed, the then Communist Chief Minister of Kerala

E.K. Nayanar claimed that the 'miracle' was in the interest of Kerala's economy!

It did not occur to the Constitutional functionaries that the Devaswom Board – an organ of the State, and partly publicly funded – and its officers have an obligation to uphold the Indian Constitution, to guarantee equality between the genders, and to ensure freedom of religion and worship to all. India's criminal procedure code imposes penalties on institutions and individuals that discriminate against women.

Kerala's Regress

Historically, Kerala was at the heart of the movement which enabled temple entry to all, irrespective of caste. Periyar, the Tamil Humanist and Rationalist leader of the self-respect movement, chose Vaikom in Kerala to launch his movement. Sri Narayana Guru is still considered an inspiration for those trying to modernize Indian society. Indeed, Kerala (Travancore) was the first state in India to throw open its doors to people of all castes. It is the most literate state in the country and its health statistics are the envy of many a developed country. However, the latest developments relating to the rights of women are sure to shame the state for the blatant discrimination that is going unpunished.

Today, the Devaswom Board uses with impunity – and with the full backing of the left Government – the state's police to perpetuate despicable acts of discrimination and treats women as if they were dangerous creatures – why else do they have a 4 tier security to keep off non violent, pious and usually helpless human beings? Of course we can always wonder why women would like to go to see a God who does not want them in his presence – and the pious Jayamala has announced her intention to visit the Lord again, but this time after she turns 50 because the ecstasy of seeing and touching the Lord's idol brought her indescribable joy!!!

In 1999, the Left Democratic Front government amended a previous government's legislation that only Hindu MLAs "who have faith in temple worship and God" could elect or nominate members of the Devaswom Boards. Electors and members of the Board had to declare in writing that they had faith in temple worship and God.

This writer considers the existence of Government appointed Dewasvom Boards inappropriate, and indeed an undue interference by the state in religious affairs. Very often, as in the present case, this arrangement will only result in promotion of religion. One is also stunned that the High Court has interpreted the law against the fundamental freedoms of women. In any case, the then Left Democratic Front government's actions were an unwarranted interference in the affairs of Hindu Religious institutions, trying to fill them up with atheists. Today's government speaks in two tongues: it refuses to intercede on behalf of the women, but is willing to 'interfere' with Devaswom affairs when on 27 June this year it decided to implement 33 per cent job reservation for scheduled castes and backward classes in the Travancore Devaswom Board.

Monumental Fraud, Despicable Crime

Makara Vilakku, the divine light that appears three times on the Ponnambalamedu hill across from the temple on every 14 January is due to the collusion of the government in perpetuating a fraud on the devotees. It is in itself contrary

*History has shown it.
Tradition has affirmed it. Myth has reinforced it. Women have no place in God's Kingdom.*

to the Indian Constitution's exhortation to all citizens to promote the scientific temper. Continuing to prevent women between 10 and 50 years of age from entering this particular temple (while Ayyappa temples elsewhere allow women to enter) is a crime that needs to be dealt with as such. Despite protests from progressive forces, the

Devaswom Board has held on to the outrageously lame explanations as to why women cannot be allowed. It does not occur to them that their suggestion that a fertile woman in the presence of their Lord would weaken the resolve of their Lord is a blasphemous thought. It does not occur to them that the explanation that the trek to the temple was too arduous for women to undertake is an obvious lie: if they were so concerned about the safety and welfare of women, would they welcome girls below ten (pre-puberty) and women over 50 (post-menopause) to climb the hill, neither of whom would have the strength to go up a steep hill? In any case, a dolly service is available for old people who cannot walk. Why cannot women use that?

Women in God's Kingdom

The fact is that the Devaswom Board is filled with orthodox Hindus ready to uphold the despicable degradation of women – they dare suggest that a woman in menses is an impure person, not worthy of the sight of the God they adore. After several decades of social and religious reform and near 100% literacy in the state, the Travancore Devaswom Board which today employs 10,000 people has only 6 Dalits on its payroll. And not a single one is employed as a *shanti* (priest).

This is the true character of the Devaswom Board and of Kerala state's commitment to genuine reform.

As Jonathan Edwards once wrote "Temples have their images ... but in truth, the ideas and images in men's minds are the invisible powers that constantly govern them; and to these they all pay universally a ready submission." The temple at Sabaraimala is a crass reflection of a primitive image of women held by the religious mind. It is a mind that sneers at the concept of human dignity and hides itself between spurious claims of freedom of religion.

What prevents the temple authorities at Sabarimala who boast that their temple is open to all castes and indeed to all religions (because one of Ayyappa legends says he was friends with an Arab and a Christian) from opening this one single temple to women, except their hideous orthodoxy? If they do decide to prosecute Jayamala or the other women who claim to have visited the temple, they will be exposed as fools living in another era.

Women have never had their rightful place in any religious minds: they were looked down as corrupting, lustful, devious and wicked – and that is when they were considered human! Most organised religions taught men and trained women to look at women as debased and lowly. Some may have looked at women as goddesses, but rarely as women.

History has shown it. Tradition has affirmed it. Myth has reinforced it. Women have no place in God's Kingdom.

There is perhaps, therefore, no irony in the fact that Kerala's tourist department promotes Kerala as God's Own Country.

UHESWO inaugurated in Kampala

The Ugandan Humanist Effort to Save Women (UHESWO) was inaugurated by the former president of IHEU Levi Fragell and IHEU's International Representative Babu Gogineni on 17th June, 2006 in Kampala, Uganda.

On that day, UHESWO members focussed on *Violation of Women's Rights in Uganda*. The speakers looked at how women's rights are abused by governments, cultures and religions.

Deo Ssekitoaleko, the chairperson of UHASSO, spoke on the need to cultivate all the four H's of Humanism: Human Rights, Human Dignity, Human Reason and Human Potential. "A Humanist has her rights hence, should respect other people's rights. She has to respect herself then others will respect her. She should always be able to reason. She has the potential to do everything."

Babu Gogineni said that oppression of women was not only in Africa but also in other parts of the world like in the Arab countries, in India and in Nepal. The degree of discrimination varied, but at the source are the same primitive attitudes towards women. The acceptance of true democracy and genuine democratic values in a society are vital for ensuring equal rights for all women. He urged women to actively participate in social change, and to continue to fight against abuse of women's rights themselves. Then we were grateful that Babu gave us a start-up gift of Euros 200, on behalf of the president of IHEU Sonja Eggerickx.

Levi shared with us his past experiences as a preacher and warned all against the danger of letting religion



Betty Nasaka and Levi Fragell unfurl UHESWO banner

continue its control of people's minds. As a preacher he saw that 90 percent of the congregation were women – in most cases, he found that they were victims, seeking help. The influence of western evangelists in African society is having a devastating effect on society. Today African women are being misled that faith in Jesus would cure AIDS – this has even led many innocent women to get married to men who are victims of AIDS.

Organised in a pleasant open space, the event had serious and powerful speeches by members of UHESWO, accompanied by poetry reading, song and dance.

Harriet Mugambwa, Member UHESWO

Violation of Women's Rights in Uganda

VIOLATION OF RIGHTS AT WORK

Segregation in Occupation

Though the country is trying to promote and empower women, the gap is still wide when it comes to job opportunities e.g. the recent appointment of ministers in government: out of sixty nine ministers only fourteen are women which is 20% women representation. In 2003, Uganda ratified ILO convention No. 100 of 1951 on equal remuneration for men and women for work of equal value and also Convention III of 1958 which promotes equality of opportunity and treatment in employment and occupation, as a means to eliminate all discrimination. But when it comes to implementation the problem remains.

Abuse of Rights in Job-recruitment

- First priority is always given to males regardless of qualifications. Women are looked as baby-manufacturers who are forever on leave causing a loss to the company.

- Some women are abused by men sexually before giving them employment.
- Most women are employed in low-paying jobs and have low status jobs. Consequently, women are inferior to men in matters such as mortality, mobility, power and income.

Discrimination in Employment

- *Promotions:* most promotions in jobs go to men.
- *Education and Training opportunities:* Men are offered these privileges more than women.
- *Wage differentials or salary inequalities:* Women earn less for doing the same job as a man, even if they have the same qualifications.
- *Retrenchment:* Women are always the first target; this means women are forced out of the formal sector and are forced to enter the informal sector where their rights are further at risk.

Occupational segregation on the basis of sex will not be totally eliminated but can be reduced – if women were

freer to choose their occupation and employers were more considerate. The norms of the ILO conventions and the Employment Act which was recently passed in parliament would help immensely if men and women can work jointly to implement them.

As culture also has a role to play in this unfortunate situation it is our wish that the Domestic Relations Bill whose objective is to reform and consolidate the law relating to marriage be passed. The Bill would also cover separation and divorce for the types of recognized marriages in Uganda, define marital rights and duties, spell out rights of parties on dissolution of marriage. All this will be possible if UHESWO embarks on an active program of sensitization of people.

Betty Nassaka is Chairperson of UHESWO

VIOLATION IN THE NAME OF CULTURE

A culture refers to the customs, beliefs, art, music and all the other products of human thought made by a particular group of people at a particular time.

Examples of culture in Uganda include Buganda culture, Banyankole culture, Bakiga culture, Sebei culture etc.

Female Genital Mutilation

This is commonly referred to as female circumcision. It is popular in the Sebei culture.

It is not bad to respect culture, but the rights of humans – including women – are paramount. Many women contract diseases because of the unsterilised objects used; there is severe pain and many have even lost their lives due to this barbaric practice.

Forced Marriages

Marriage should be a legally accepted relationship between a woman and a man in which they live as husband and wife with consent. Some Ugandans rubbish this idea, since they believe that their daughter should marry when the parents feel like it, breasts have developed on their daughter's chest, a potential partner comes from a rich family. Parents are generally poor, and exchange their daughters for a consideration of money – called bride wealth. The will and consent of the girl/woman is rarely ascertained. No woman can ever enjoy her marriage unless there is consent and an element of readiness.

Attribution of Misfortune to Women

Women in Uganda are the victims of circumstance. This is mainly as a result of superstitions and myths in the different cultures.

Many men cancel their activities because they have crossed/met a woman somewhere – because women are a sign of bad luck. Women are often blamed for infertility, even before a medical report is obtained. When a child is born, if the gender is not that desired by the men, if a child is born with a deficiency, or even if there is a miscarriage, it is the woman who is blamed.

Deprivation of Inheritance Rights

There are cultures in Uganda which totally deprive the



Women in Uganda carry a heavy load

Credit: www.hip-human.no

girl child of her parent's property. Worse, those who inherit the property usually give little or no assistance to the girls – even if the girl is going to school or college.

In addition to the above, women have been violated in other spheres like social life where they are segregated during worship. They also have fewer chances of participating in village or clan leadership.

I humbly call upon the female Humanists to fight for the rights of women especially as violated by cultures. Our approach should be scientific and democratic.

Barbra Nakatemwa is Vice chairperson of UHESWO

VIOLATION IN THE NAME OF RELIGION

Reproductive Rights

It would be good if a woman were given the right to have the number of children that she is able to manage. Some religions do not allow women to use family planning methods. This has led to the birth of many children whose mothers are unable to look after them due to poverty.

Some religions regard women as a property of men. Women are not allowed to work or to move out of the house. This mind set means that education of the girl child is not encouraged – boys are educated and girls are prepared for marriage.

There are religious cults which do not allow women to eat some types of food e.g. egg, meat and fish – food that would be beneficial to women's health and which would help women gain resistance to many common diseases.

Some religions in Uganda deny women access to proper medical care – and they do not allow blood transfusions. Sick women are encouraged to pray for recovery – many die as a consequence.

Humanists have to focus on the dangers of religion to women in Africa. We should seriously adopt science to help our fellow women to develop rationally and intellectually through reason and scientific discovery.

These religions which oppress women should be opposed and rejected by us.

Erinah Nabbanja is a Committee member of UHESWO

In Defence of Secularism

Humanism holds the key to a great and glorious future for this country. And all of us who subscribe to the humanist outlook must rise up to the historic challenge of unlocking our country's humanist potentials and promises.

In this world we can choose to be indifferent, we can also choose to make a difference. I believe all us in this hall have chosen to make a difference. Today one way we can use to make a difference in Nigeria is by defending secularism. Secularism entails the separation of religion and state and the non-involvement of religion in the organization of society, in policy making and in education.

- Because we live in a religiously and philosophically pluralistic country, it is imperative we defend secularism.
- Because we want to build a nation that is free, open and democratic, we must defend secularism
- Because we want to build a state that can be an impartial arbiter and guarantor of the rights and liberties of all citizens whether they are religious believers or non-believers, we must defend secularism
- Because we want to realize a nation where no human being is oppressed or discriminated against on the basis of his religious belief or unbelief, we must uphold the separation of religion and state. Because we want to build a nation where we can send our children to schools without the fear that they will be indoctrinated and brainwashed with religious dogmas and fanatical creeds, we must defend secularism.
- Because we want Nigeria to produce thinkers, inventors, innovators and discoverers of cures to diseases and solutions to the socio-economic problems that afflict humanity and not suicide bombers, jihadists, crusaders and holy warriors, we must defend secularism.
- Because we want to realize a Nigeria where science, technological intelligence, critical thinking, human rights, freethought and free speech will flourish without the threat of fatwa, blasphemy and inquisition we must uphold the separation of church/mosque and state.
- Because we live in a nation that has lost so many lives to religious bloodletting, sectarian violence, ritual murder and witch killing, we must defend secularism.

Religion belongs to the private domain of individual believers, and should not define or direct public good,

legislation and education. The public space belongs to everybody and should be a market place where all ideas and beliefs – religious, nonreligious, theistic, non-theistic, scientific, nonscientific, dogmatic, non-dogmatic, transcendental and mundane can interact openly and freely. Hence a situation like in Zamfara, Yobe, Kano, Bauchi and other muslim majority states in the Northern Nigeria where the government legislates, organizes and administers justice and public order on the basis of one religion and one “holy book” is totally unacceptable.

Let us make no mistake about it, a government under the rule of divine laws is not a democracy but a theocracy.

So, in the spirit of democracy and secularism, the Nigerian government must stop the implementation of sharia law and other religious laws at all levels. Nigeria must stop funding religious courts, religious schools and religious pilgrimages. The Aso Rock Chapel and other state owned and state-run churches, mosques and places of worship nationwide must be closed down.

Humanists, Secularists and Freethinkers must strive to loosen the dark and dangerous grip of religion on Nigerian thought, culture, politics, conscience and civilization. We must mobilize and lobby to enthrone an open secular society where every individual will be judged not by the religion he professes or the church or mosque she attends or the holy book he believes or disbelieves in, but by the content of her character.

- Secularism stands for justice, equality and freedom.
- Secularism stands for the liberation and emancipation of humanity.
- Secularism is critical to Nigerian democracy, unity, development, peace and progress.
- Secularism is imperative to the realization of African Renaissance, planetary humanism and New Enlightenment.

So let us all strive to defend the ideals of secularism and separation of religion and state vigorously at this conference and beyond.

Leo Igwe is Executive Secretary of Nigerian Humanist Movement and an IHEU's Growth and Development Committee representative in Africa.

“We Nigerians use our Christianity as a drunken man uses the street lamp-post, for physical support only. I know of no other country where the profession of Christianity is more noisily trumpeted than it is in Nigeria, and yet I doubt whether there is any other country where there is greater rapacity, worse corruption and more disregard of the golden rule.

“Nigeria of thirty years from now would be much less

corrupt, much more thorough, much more socially responsible, but certainly much more religiously disinclined, formally speaking, unless history fails to repeat itself and thus yield grounds to those of your present teachers and my old ones who, being static and conservative, have continued to be ignorant, self-centred transmitters of dead or moribund traditions”.

Tai Solarin, 1954

Let us Open a New Front for Humanism

Terje Emberland

Public Perception of Humanism

When the humanist movement is covered in the media, it is usually as a result of our critique of organised religion, and the misuse of power by religious institutions.

The reason for this is two-fold. Firstly, the simple fact that it is a lot easier to get the attention of journalists by provocative statements and harsh attacks than by conveying a positive message. Conflict sells and provocations make interesting headlines.

Secondly, it is due to us Humanists ourselves. Because most Humanists have reached their life stance through a – often painful – process of liberating them selves from personal religious convictions or at least from a dominating religious environment, the critique of religion has become a defining aspect of their life stance and the single most important motivating factor behind their commitment. And this is then, in turn, conveyed through the media.

And these two factors are mutually reinforcing each other. The journalists are looking for conflicts, and – since we time and time again experience that it is easy to attract media attention by attacking religion – we are more than willing to provide them with what they want.

However, this has an impact on the popular perception of Humanism. To most people outside our movement, and also to some inside, Humanism is equated with atheism. We are first and foremost anti-religious.

Opposing Humanism to Religion

And in many respects I think it cannot be otherwise. As long as organised religion has such a dominating position in our societies, it is virtually impossible not to describe the humanist life stance by contrasting it to prevailing religious ideas.

And I'm not saying that this is all bad, on the contrary. Speaking from the Norwegian experience, it is a fact that the rapid growth of the Norwegian humanist movement in the 70s and the 80s was a direct result of our critique of the state church monopoly and Christianity's dominant position in the public sphere. Now it seems that our Swedish friends in Humanisterna are experiencing much of the same thing: a clear and out-spoken stance on the hegemony of Christianity and the church creates media attention and a rapid growth in members.

It is, however, also our experience that if the humanist movement is going to consolidate itself and ensure enduring commitment among its members, it has to be perceived as more than just an organisation for anti-religious activists. Consequently, we have to try to present other aspects of Humanism to the public.

Now, this is obviously a great challenge. Due to the factors I've mentioned, the fact remains that it is easier to present Humanism negatively by what we are against than to present it positively by what we are for.

If the Humanist movement is to consolidate itself and ensure enduring commitment from its members, it has to be perceived as more than just an organisation for anti-religious activists.

However, by taking this into account, I would like to mention one thing by which we can broaden the perception of the humanist life stance to include more of our positive values.

Broadening our Attack

And this is not by flooding the news desks with flowery press releases on the value of individual freedom, free inquiry and such. But simply by being even more critical and negative, by broadening our attacks to

include other phenomenon in our society than that of organised religion.

I have one particular thing in mind, which in a fundamental way violates and challenges humanist values. This is only an example. Others could be mentioned. They have to be applied to the specific situation in each country.

When the International Humanist and Ethical Union was established in 1952 it was just after the Second World War and the disaster and suffering brought about by Nazism and Stalinism. It is quite clear that for the founders of the IHEU, Humanism was perceived to be an alternative, not only to organised religion, but also – and in particular – to this kind of totalitarian political religion.

I think it is time to bring this more to the foreground again. By taking a clear stand against the growing fascist, right-wing populist, racist and xenophobic tendencies in many parts of the world, we will be able to highlight aspects of Humanism that is not so much in focus though our critique of organised religion.

What makes us unique

For the fight against this is not a solely ethical matter. The rejection of these tendencies on ethical grounds is something we share with most religious people. What we, however, can demonstrate is that totalitarian political ideologies not only are ethically wrong but also by nature anti-rationalist, and hence violates basic epistemological concepts in Humanism. Consequently, our fight against fascism will not only highlight the ethical values of Humanism, but also our commitment to free inquiry, scientific methods and rationality and demonstrate how these ideals are intrinsically linked up with democracy.

What I'm saying is that we have to demonstrate that to Humanists the fight against totalitarian ideologies both on the left and right side of the political spectrum is not a matter of politics, but is part of our world view and fundamentally linked to our perception of truth and ethical outlook.

Another point is that many people have positive perceptions of religion, and this is why a humanist critique of religion is seen as more negative than it actually is. But most people have a very different attitude towards racism and fascism. Therefore it's much easier to see the positive values in the

The fight against totalitarian ideologies is part of our world view and fundamentally linked to our perception of truth and ethical outlook.

humanist position, when its critique is directed against these ideologies, even though this critique is based on exactly the same values as the critique of religion, namely universalism, rationalism, free inquiry and human rights.

Hence, we should write more on these subjects in our magazines, we should cooperate with serious anti-fascist organisations and take part in anti-racist activities, and we should, when given the opportunity, take the initiative in anti-fascist demonstrations.

Occasionally this will entail going in alliance with religious organisations that the humanist movement often regard as their prime opponents, something that will demonstrate that we are able to apply tolerance and respect for freedom of religion in practice.

By opening up this second front, so to speak, we will still be defining Humanism negatively. But it will give us the possibility to more clearly circumscribe our position. And hence, hopefully broaden the public perception of Humanism. This front will highlight other parts of our life stance than those which are focused in our critique of organised religion. And it will demonstrate why humanist rationalism is the best safeguard against this totalitarian danger.

Terje Emberland is a former Editor of Humanist, published by the Humanist Association of Norway. He is an active skeptic and one of Norway's leading experts on Racism and Fascism.

IHEU condemns restrictions on freedom of expression at the UN

In a statement to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, IHEU has condemned attempts to stifle legitimate criticism of religion and academic research into religious history and custom on the grounds of supposed "defamation of religion", in particular the resolutions on "Combating Defamation of Religions" passed at the Human Rights Commission from 1999 to 2005.

The following is the text of a statement by Roy Brown, IHEU's main representative at the UN in Geneva, to the Second Session of the Human Rights Council, 4 October 2006 on the subject of Incitement to religious hatred.

Mr President,

In the context of proposal A/HRC/2/L.25 concerning incitement to racial and religious hatred, I refer to our oral statement to the Council of 26 June 2006 [1] and to our written statement E/CN.4/2006/NGO/244, "Islamophobia and Freedom of Expression" and would like to draw the attention of delegates to a report [2] which appeared in the August 2006 edition of the Sri Lanka Journal of International Law. The report is crucial to the debate. It points out that the wording of the 1999 to 2005 resolutions of the Commission on "Combating Defamation of Religions", makes restrictions on speech that are contrary to many international instruments. The report makes three recommendations for improvement:

First, any such resolution should include language that deplores the use of religion in order to justify or incite any form of violence and hatred.

Secondly, the resolution should make it clear that the judgment of whether a particular expression constitutes defamation of religion should be objective [to ensure that States cannot rely on the Resolution to justify suppression of legitimate opinions they do not like. Freedom of religion does not protect religious feelings, because freedom of religion includes the right to express views critical of the religious opinions of others]. An objective definition of "defamation of religion" will ensure that States cannot isolate themselves from legitimate criticism by restricting academic research



UN Human Rights Council in Session

concerning religious history and custom, or from expressions that criticize religious practices or that introduce social reforms. To this end, the provisions in the resolutions that define defamation of religions as the association of Islam with terrorism and with human rights violations, and with "negative stereotyping" of Islam, should be omitted because they would restrict speech on matters of public importance and critical of public officials.

Finally, the resolution should require States to comply with international law. [Violations of freedom of speech often occur simultaneously with violations of other fundamental rights.] This provision will ensure that States will not try to use restrictions on freedom of speech to nullify other fundamental rights.

We urge members of the Council to carefully consider these recommendations which we believe would significantly improve the wording of any future resolution on combating defamation of religion and lead to far wider acceptance of such a resolution.

The report is available on the internet [3].

Thank you

[1] www.iheu.org/node/2307

[2] Grinberg, Maxim, "Defamation of Religion v. Freedom of Speech: Finding the Balance in a Democratic Society". Sri Lanka Journal of International Law, Vol. 18, August 2006

[3] http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=911968

Joint Declaration of the Ligue de l'Enseignement and the Fédération Nationale de la Libre Pensée

The Fédération Nationale de la Libre Pensée (French National Freethought Organisation) and the Ligue de l'Enseignement (League for Education) met in Paris on July 7, 2006 to discuss the current situation regarding secularism. Our organisations, amongst the oldest of the French secularist movement, are the bearers of identities and programs which are different, though based on common values. Our history has sometimes been tumultuous – debates and confrontations, sometimes virulent, were part of this, as were common struggles in the service of secularisation of society and of the republican institutions. Today, we jointly acknowledge the need to confront our analyses and seek convergences.

The Ligue de l'Enseignement and the Fédération Nationale de la Libre Pensée are pleased to see that many secularist associations have jointly adopted a declaration: “Do not touch the 1905 Law”. The Fédération Nationale de la Libre Pensée and the Ligue de l'Enseignement too affirm their absolute opposition to two private members' bills recently put on the agenda of the French National Assembly. To embark on a revision of the law obviously implies many risks for the very principle of secularism.

The first bill, whose author is the MP Jean-Marc Roubaud, is nothing but the reestablishment of the offence of blasphemy in the press. We recall that this offence had disappeared during the Revolution, and that only King Charles X's reactionary regime – he was the sanctimonious king – tried to re-establish it. There is no possibility for democracy without absolute freedom of expression and without accepting that all opinions must be granted equal status. This regression, which follows the same line as that of the French extreme right, is completely unacceptable.

The second bill, as unacceptable as the first one, was authored by the MP Jacques Myard. According to the provisions of its first article: “No cultural or religious prescription allows anyone to put a veil over one's face in a public street; anyone moving on the territory of the republic must have an unveiled face, allowing one's recognition or identification”. The third article provides for the deportation of all foreigners wearing an Islamic veil. The text does not even hide its ulterior motives behind its veil of hypocrisies. Only one category of people is targeted – Muslim women. It does not seem that women belonging to the Roman Catholic religious order should be concerned by this prohibition.

Those two bills completely ignore the principles on which a secular republic is based. Their adoption would be a violation of the first article of the constitution as well as the first two articles of the 1905 law, and on the other hand it would place France in an awkward position concerning its sovereign international commitments.

The Ligue de l'Enseignement and the Fédération Nationale de la Libre Pensée consider that the absolute freedom of conscience established by the first article of

the 1905 law includes the right for anyone to have a religion or not to have one as well as the possibility to have either of those beliefs criticised.

Both belief and non belief are part of individual convictions. The law has nothing to say in such matters, unless one has to define, democratically, the extent of public order. Likewise, law courts should not establish themselves as referees of religious fashion.

The strict separation between the world of individual convictions, including religion, and that of the public service, as established by the 1905 law, implies a number of consequences: criticising religion or claiming one's religious belief is a matter of individual freedom of expression only; the State has the obligation to keep a strict neutrality when it intervenes in the framework of a mission of general interest, which justifies the prohibition of the wearing of any religious sign by public servants.

More generally, the Fédération Nationale de la Libre Pensée and the Ligue de l'Enseignement, will not accept any law of exception, discriminatory by principle. This is why both organisations have jointly criticised the law of March 15, 2004 concerning the wearing of religious signs or items of clothing in public primary or secondary schools. It was a law with electoral aims and which, in spite of its apparent general wording, was targeting only one category of people. Significantly, the popular reference to it is “the law concerning the veil”. The stigmatisation of any category of the population cannot but lead to discrimination, xenophobic temptations and communitarian clashes.

The Ligue de l'Enseignement and the Fédération Nationale de la Libre Pensée are also absolutely opposed to the provisions of article 89 of the law of August 13, 2004 concerning local liberties and responsibilities, which make contribution by town councils towards the cost of education of pupils going to private schools mandatory – even those which are located outside their territory. Both organisations demand the abrogation of this article which notably increases the public funding of private schools, to the detriment of the development of the secular public service of education.

The Fédération Nationale de la Libre Pensée and the Ligue de l'Enseignement hereby agreed to have further and regular exchanges of their viewpoints. They seek, with respect to the diversity of their approaches, all convergences of viewpoints, thus making it possible the daily implementation of secularism which allows the emancipation of individuals and the safeguarding of the plurality of opinions. They propose to broaden those meetings to all secular organisations willing to build a coalition that could open new paths for common actions in defence of secularism of School and State.

Ligue de l'enseignement

Jean-Michel Ducomte, President

Fédération nationale de la Libre Pensée

Christian Eyschen, Secretary General

Dialogue Among Religions, Cultures, and Civilizations?

Humanist Chaplaincy 30th Anniversary Gala Symposium

Friday 20 April and Saturday 21 April, 2007

Harvard University

A galaxy of distinguished Humanist celebrities!

Three decades ago Tom Ferrick founded the Humanist Chaplaincy at Harvard University. Tom then led the Chaplaincy to become a permanent, endowed position at Harvard, and on April 20 and 21, 2007 there will be a celebration of 30 years of his service to Harvard and Humanism.

To honor Tom and his historic vision, Harvard will host a major Humanist symposium on the theme "Dialogue Among Religions, Cultures, and Civilizations?" where the Humanist Chaplaincy will lay out a bold new vision for the future of Humanism at Harvard and universities across the US.

Confirmed participants include

- Salman Rushdie will receive the first annual Outstanding Lifetime Achievement Award in Cultural Humanism. Rushdie will offer a literary reading on Friday night, and then on Saturday will address the subject of "Humanistic Islam".
- 2002 International Humanist of the Year Amartya Sen, Harvard Lamont University Professor Emeritus and winner of the 1998 Nobel Prize in Economics, will speak on Indian Humanism.
- 1999 American Humanist of the Year E.O. Wilson, Harvard Pellegrino University Professor, member of the board of directors of the Humanist Chaplaincy at Harvard, two-time Pulitzer Prize winner hailed as "the new Darwin" by many.
- 2006 American Humanist of the Year Steven Pinker, Harvard Johnstone Family Professor of Psychology and one of Time Magazine's "100 Most Influential People in the World," 2004.
- 2003 American Humanist of the Year Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine, founder of the international movement of Humanistic Judaism and one of the world's most inspiring Humanist orators.
- Professor Tu Weiming, Director of Harvard's Yenching Institute for Chinese Studies, the world's leading authority on Confucian Humanism, and one of the world's most important living thinkers on Chinese philosophy.
- Ambassador John L. Loeb Jr., who will receive an award for his work leading the \$10 million restoration campaign of the Touro Synagogue, to which George Washington wrote his famous letter on "to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance."
- Humanist Philanthropist Louis Appignani, founder of the Appignani Center for Bioethics at the United Nations and the Appignani Humanist Legal Center in Washington, D.C.
- Lori Lipman Brown, Director, Secular Coalition for America, Washington D.C.
- Fred Edwards, Director of Communications, American Humanist Association
- Ambassador Carl Coon, Harvard class of 1949 and member of the American Humanist Association board of directors
- Thomas Ferrick, Humanist Chaplain Emeritus of Harvard University

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Farewell to three stalwarts

IHEU deeply regrets to report the loss of three Humanist stalwarts in recent months. (see back cover).

Prof. Vern Bullough (1928 - 2006) was IHEU's co-Chair when IHEU was based in the Netherlands. He later became one of IHEU's vice presidents and was amongst the leaders who steered IHEU into safe waters after the move to London. Former dean of the Faculty of Natural and Social Sciences at Buffalo State, Vern Bullough was, as the New York times obituary noted, "a pioneer in many fields from the study of the cultural and biological aspects of human sexuality to the effectiveness of military deterrence". He was past president of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality and a founder of the American Association for the History of Nursing. Vern attended IHEU's General Assembly in New York in April 2006 when he announced that he was suffering from cancer.

Alexandre Marius-dees-de-Sterio's tragic death in a train accident is a serious loss to Humanism and to the Council of Europe where he represented IHEU. Marius was a recipient of the Council of Europe's rare Pro Merito award for his contribution to propagating the ideals of the Council of Europe. He received IHEU's Distinguished Service to Humanism award in 2005. A staunch defender of human rights, Marius was active in IHEYO in the 70s, helped IHEU get Consultative Status with the Council of Europe, as well as the amicus curiae status with the European Court of Human Rights. He was a well known freethinker, respected for his views and loved for his personality. The Council of Europe's website noted that 'his commitment to Europe was intense and long-lasting'. A popular teacher and a warm human being, Marius leaves behind a grieving family of humanists in addition to his wife Marianne and two young daughters to whom IHEU passed on its deepest condolences.

Over 15,000 people attended the funeral of **Saraswati Gora**, 94, co-founder of the Atheist Center, Vijayawada. Saraswati Gora (1912 - 2006), who retained her clarity of mind till the very end, was known for her robust common sense and for her path-breaking joint contributions – along with her late husband Gora – to establishing atheism as a respected way of life. With an impressive personality and a crystal clear voice, Saraswati Gora presided over the atheist center's functioning for the last three decades. She leaves behind a large family of atheist activists with impressive personal accomplishments. Saraswati Gora's is a legacy rich in activism which ranged from combating untouchability to fighting the caste system to providing an atheist approach to social change. With her death one of the last remaining atheists of the older generation has left us.

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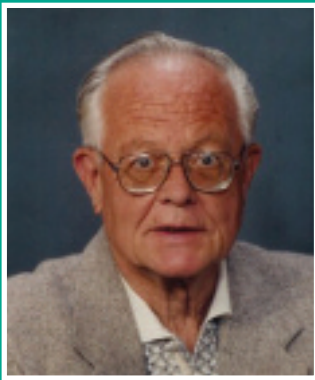
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