

## **A submission from the BRITISH HUMANIST ASSOCIATION on the PROPOSED CONSTITUTION FOR EUROPEAN UNION**

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is the principal organisation representing the interests of the large and growing population of ethically concerned but non-religious people in the UK. It is deeply committed to human rights and democracy, and has a long history of active engagement in work for an open and inclusive society, with guaranteed individual freedoms including those of belief and speech, and in which the government and official bodies maintain a disinterested impartiality towards the many groups within society so long as they conform to the minimum conventions of the society. While we seek to promote the Humanist lifestance, we do not seek any privilege in doing so. Correspondingly, while we respect the deep commitment of some other people to religious views, we reject any claims they may make to privileged positions by virtue of their beliefs.

We believe that these principles, also implicit in the European Convention on Human Rights, must be fundamental to the proposed European Constitution, and we are gravely concerned at proposals to include, in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, references to Christianity - or to religion - as being fundamental to the nature of Europe. The significant role of Christianity in European history is undeniable - but it has generally been a divisive one: the basis of religious wars and the persecution of 'heretics' and unbelievers. If the churches now adopt more tolerant language, it has largely been under pressure from secular traditions, derived from the development of the concepts of human rights and equality.

Just as the new Europe seeks to rise above national differences, so must it rise above differences in fundamental beliefs. The European Convention on Human Rights asserts the right to freedom of religion or belief, putting non-religious beliefs on a par with religious beliefs. This is essential in today's Europe where there are large minorities who adhere to non-Christian religious beliefs, and very large numbers who adopt non-religious lifestances such as Humanism.

It is shameful for the churches to act in a partisan way, seeking sectional advantage for their own beliefs, in a document that aims to inspire such a diverse population as that of the emerging European Union and bind them together in a commitment to shared fundamental values.

The preamble to the European constitution should instead recognise the cultural history of Europe, which owes at least as much to the classical world as to Christianity. Our cultural history is a pluralist one, with many different traditions following their own paths but influencing and enriching each other. This wealth and freedom of choice, this mutuality and interdependence, is of the essence of the modern Europe, quite unlike the assertion of primacy now being assiduously lobbied for by the churches.

Our two specific suggestions are: (a) That the second paragraph of Declaration 11 (on the status of churches and non-confessional organisations) attached to the Treaty of Amsterdam 1997 be incorporated into the Constitution so as to give it legal force. This refers to the European Union having equal respect for those who are non-religious or non-confessional; and (b) that the Constitution include some such reference as: "The Union is founded on the principles of the rule of law: freedom, equality, democracy and pluralism. It guarantees respect for and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms and does not discriminate between individuals or groups on irrelevant grounds."

***British Humanist Association  
February 2003***