INTERNATIONAL HUMANIST AND ETHICAL UNION
1 Gower Street, London WC1E 6HD, United Kingdom
E Mail iheu-office@iheu.org
Website www.iheu.org

national secular society
25 Red Lion Square
London WC1R 4RL
TEL: 020 7404 3126
FAX: 0870 762 8971
EMAIL: enquiries@secularism.org.uk
WEB: www.secularism.org.uk

Council of Europe - 118th Session of the Committee of Ministers

White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue

Living Together As Equals in Dignity

Strasbourg, 7 May 2008

This document identifies references made in the above White Paper[1] to the non-religious or secular perspectives, thought to have been positively influenced by NSS/IHEU input. This include a response to Council's Questionnaire[2], the major paper *Supporting Information & Commentary*[3] dated 31 July 2007 (both by Keith Porteous Wood) , and interventions by Keith Porteous Wood (for IHEU and NSS in Paris, Strasbourg and San Marino) and Terry Sanderson (NSS, in Strasbourg)

1. One of the main achievements of the NSS/IHEU is to ensure that the non-religious are included as an interest group and that secular and civil organisations are included in consultations and considered '*stakeholders***'***(25).***

(10)The White Paper is addressed to policy-makers and administrators, to educators and the media, and to civil-society organisations

2. Non-believers are specifically mentioned throughout the White Paper as having equal rights, being equally able to contribute to discussions of morality and forming an equal part of our cultural history, for example:

[1] http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/Source/White%20Paper%20final%20EN%20020508.pdf
[2] http://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/35483bf294ad1ed592257406.pdf
[3] http://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/3546cec0d096448823933094.pdf

(71) Freedom of thought, conscience and religion is one of the foundations of democratic society and protected by Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights. This freedom is one of the most vital elements referring to the identity of believers and their conception of life, as it is also for atheists, agnostics, sceptics and the unconcerned.

and

(73) …with due respect for the rights of non-believers. Those holding non-religious worldviews have an equal right to contribute, alongside religious representatives, to debates on the moral foundations of society and to be engaged in forums for intercultural dialogue.

3. Not only is the non-religious world-view part of our heritage, it should be taught as such (a battle that continues in British schools).

(156) An appreciation of our diverse cultural background should include knowledge and understanding of the major world religions and non-religious convictions and their role in society.

4. The right to freedom of speech is upheld throughout the Paper, with the usual caveats about responsibilities, incitement to hatred etc. However, it recognises the need to protect the right to criticise and offend, a freedom of speech issue that we have campaigned hard for, particularly in the light of recent attempts to enforce 'defamation of religion' as an offence.

(83) The European Court of Human Rights has however set a high bar against restrictions on free expression, indicating that even expressions that "offend, shock or disturb" should be protected. This means, for example, a certain licence to criticise another's religion (as a system of ideas which they can choose to embrace).

5. The Paper is also very clear that religion cannot be used to exempt people or groups from respecting Human Rights, a special privilege that religious groups continue to fight for and which we continue to fight against:

(59) *Ethnic, cultural, religious or linguistic affiliations or traditions cannot be invoked to prevent individuals from exercising their human rights or from responsible participating in society. This principle applies especially to the right not to suffer from gender-based or other forms of discrimination, the rights and interests of children and young people, and the freedom to practise or not to practise a particular religion or belief. Human rights abuses, such as forced marriages, "honour crimes" or genital mutilations can never be justified whatever the cultural context. Equally, the rules of a – real or imagined – "dominant culture" cannot be used to justify discrimination, hate speech or any form of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, ethnic origin or other identity.*

6. The Paper also states the need for neutral institutions to promote intercultural dialogue and to form anti-discrimination legislation.

(128) *Intercultural dialogue needs a neutral institutional and legal framework at national and local level, guaranteeing the human rights standards of the Council of Europe and based on the principles of democracy and the rule of law…Relations between religion and the state should be organised in a way to ensure that everyone has equal rights and responsibilities regardless of his or her thought, conscience or religion so that, in practice, freedom of conscience and religion is fully respected.*