

International Humanist and Ethical Union

Human Rights Council, Seventh Session 3 – 28 March 2008

Agenda Item 9 – General Debate – Contemporary forms of Racism

Statement by IHEU main representative, Roy W. Brown, 25 March 2008

The need to consider the causes of “Islamophobia”

Mr President,

We welcome the inclusion in the report of the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary forms of Racism of a chapter on the pervasive problem of caste discrimination, a phenomenon adversely affecting the lives of some 250 million people worldwide. [Discrimination based on work or descent is not unique to India or to Hinduism. It can be found on every continent. We respectfully request the Government of India to recognise that it is legitimate for the Human Rights Council to address this problem and to co-operate with the international community in finding solutions.]

We do, however, find Mr Diene’s report one-sided in dealing with the phenomena loosely described as “Islamophobia”; a term that confuses valid criticism of some aspects of Islamic practice with hatred of Muslims. These are not at all the same thing. We find it regrettable that Mr Diene is helping perpetuate this confusion, and furthermore that he focuses almost exclusively on effects whilst ignoring causes. He seems to believe that such hostility as does exist towards Islam and Muslims has arisen in a vacuum, spontaneously and without cause. But if that were so, would we not also be hearing about Hinduophobia? Buddhismophobia and even Voodoo-ophobia? Does he not feel that the behaviour of some of its followers might just possibly be contributing to the growing hostility towards Islam in the West? For example, Mr Diene mentions obstruction to the building of mosques in Europe, where every Muslim is permitted to practice his religion unhindered, but fails to mention the absolute ban on the construction of churches and even the holding of Christian worship in some Islamic states. [We note for example that Qatar, where the first church has just been opened (incidentally without a cross on top), has been severely criticised for permitting its construction. Where is the Spacial Rapporteur’s condemnation of obstruction to the building of churches?]

Section D of the report discusses the “rejection of multi-culturalism” yet surely Mr Diene cannot be unaware of calls – in the name of multiculturalism – for separate systems of law that would be contrary to the universal values of equality and one law for all. And he cannot be unaware of just how different these values are. We note, for example, a recent fatwa issued by a senior Saudi cleric calling for reporters to be declared apostates and killed for suggesting that any other religion beside Islam should be considered legitimate¹. We also read reports that the new Iranian parliament is about to debate the introduction of the death penalty for apostasy². Does Mr Diene seriously expect such news to be ignored or to be treated as valid manifestations of multiculturalism? Does he believe that to discuss these differences at all should be considered tantamount to racism?

For more than 50 years, Mr President, the International Humanist and Ethical Union has been at the forefront in promoting equality, human rights and freedom of religion or belief. Our member organisations have members coming from every racial, cultural and religious background. We are deeply concerned with the need to promote equality and respect for all persons. But we fear that focussing on effects rather than causes will do nothing to increase understanding of these problems and could actually obstruct the search for practical solutions.

We are making available our written statement on this issue.

Thank you sir.

¹ <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/L15492468.htm>

² <http://www.adnkronos.com/AKI/English/Religion/?id=1.0.1988866222>