

DELANO

UNDERSTANDING LUXEMBOURG: CURRENT AFFAIRS, BUSINESS, LIFESTYLE, CULTURE



HACKERS: RALF-PHILIPP WEINMANN ON THE UNIVERSITY OF LUXEMBOURG'S COMPUTER SECURITY LAB

Society

CRY FREEDOM

The Alliance of Humanists, Atheists and Agnostics is lobbying for the separation of church and state. It is making waves.

Text: Duncan Roberts

"We are obviously opposed to all state aid to all religious communities, but in Luxembourg we are confronted with the Catholic church," says Dr. Laurent Schley, president of AHA, the Alliance of Humanists, Atheists and Agnostics. Founded in 2010, the group now counts over 600 active members and supporters, and has gathered testimonies from people in the public eye such as writer Jemp Schuster, rally driver Chrëscht Beneké and a host of politicians from across the political spectrum (though, unsurprisingly, none from the CSV; more of which later). The group has received plenty of press coverage for its lobbying efforts calling for a separation of church and state, but it would be a mistake to think of AHA as a one-track association. "We are here to defend the rights of non-believers, and when that becomes a strong enough movement then politics will react," says Schley.

ACTIONS NOT WORDS

AHA promotes principles based on science rather than religion, as well as trying to stamp out the social pressure to be involved with the church. For instance, AHA wants to demonstrate to those people that want to celebrate ceremonial acts such as a baby naming, marriage or even a burial, that they can be conducted without the involvement of religion. Reaching out to a wider audience, AHA has also just translated a summary of some of



Luc Delfiore

its website content into English. Schley, a biologist who spent some seven years studying in England at Keele, Canterbury and Sussex universities, was among the AHA representatives that met with the new archbishop of Luxembourg, Jean-Claude Hollerich, soon after his inauguration last autumn. Schley was impressed by the archbishop's PR skills. "He tries to sound very open and he claims to be speaking to everyone, but I would judge him on his actions rather than his words." Indeed, while the archbishop said he was ashamed and contrite about the sexual abuse scandal that enveloped the church, French-language newspaper

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L'essentiel claimed in a recent article that Hollerich has reinstated a priest who had been involved in sexual abuse and was suspended by the Archbishop's predecessor Fernand Franck.

As for the separation of church and state, Schley argues that the archbishop's appeal to grant state aid to the Islamic community in Luxembourg reveals just under how much pressure he feels. "Clearly Christianity and Islam do not work well together, and the fact he is keen on giving Islam the same rights is all about self-preservation. If the government refuses aid for Islam, it will be much trickier for the Catholics to keep their huge financial privileges." AHA is also opposed to what it sees as the political influence of the church. Despite the fact that Luxembourg is one of the few countries that has passed a law to legalise assisted suicides, Schley says the Catholic church was vehemently opposed to the bill and tried to use its influence to block it. One of the most pressing matters for AHA is the abolition of religion in schools. "Dogmatic positions that have no basis in scientific evidence have no place in school. Schools should teach knowledge, not faith. The other point is: why separate pupils by creating artificial groups? School should unite children." Schley, a father of three, is shocked when he hears parents argue that religious education is the only way that their children learn values. However, AHA is not opposed to teaching children about different religions, as long as it is obligatory and also encompasses lessons about those who are athe-

STATE AND CHURCH:
the Notre-Dame Cathedral
rises above the office of the prime minister



Julien Becker

ist or agnostic. "But there should not be this religious indoctrination as it is now. That is outdated."

DISCRIMINATION

As for the archbishop's argument that the state supports cultural institutions that are used by only a minority of the population, Schley says that society is pluralistic so it is quite normal that different interests are supported by the state. "But the Catholic church goes against these principles in many ways. It is not democratic, and tries to impose its dogmatic values on the rest of society." Schley also says that cultural institutions and sports clubs produce tangible products, whereas the church does not. And, perhaps just as importantly, many religious communities discriminate against homosexuals and women—something that would not be tolerated if a cultural institution did the same. "It is amazing that the same government whose ministry for equal opportunities pro-

duces campaigns against discrimination, also massively finances an institution that does not allow women priests and discriminates against homosexuals," says Schley. But for Schley, the biggest stumbling block in making progress on a separation of the church and state is the fact that the country's largest circulation daily newspaper, *Luxemburger Wort*, is part of a media empire—Groupe Saint-Paul—that is owned by the Catholic church. The *Wort* also supports the de facto ruling political party, the CSV. "The *Wort* clearly has a huge impact and can massively influence public opinion. As a result the more progressive elements within the CSV cannot do anything about the separation of church and state, because they would risk being slammed by the *Wort*. So they don't have the political courage to express their opinion. No CSV cabinet minister would ever admit to being an atheist, even though there is at least one," says Schley. ●