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Eugenics conference – Europe

Survival of the Fittest – conference eugenics

The Ministry of Internal Affairs, Vienna, provided members of the World Youth Alliance with an ideal setting in which to welcome 150 delegates at their October 2005 conference âSurvival of the Fittestâ. The conference on eugenics was designed as a forum to consider the historical, scientific and ethical perspectives of the eugenics idea, and its effect on contemporary policy. The conference provided an opportunity for young Austrians to engage in a discussion about some of the major violations of human dignity in European history and their ideological link with developments in the field of human genetics today. By assessing the impact of ideas on policy, the World Youth Alliance aims to develop its cultural response in a way that will help reawaken the conscience of Europe and reaffirm the dignity of the human person.

Bringing together young people, medical experts, politicians and historians the meeting discussed the legacy of the eugenics idea and its effect on contemporary policy.

Drawing attention to the way that ideas shape policy and society, Director of WYA-Europe, Emilia Klepacka, drew parallels between the Eugenics ideas which were at the heart of the atrocities experienced under the National Socialist programme and the problems with contemporary bioethical and population discussions. Emilia Klepacka concentrated her remarks on the phenomena of the resistance movements and drew analogies between the experiences and insights of the leaders of these movements and the experiences of young leaders today. Commenting on Hans Scholl, she noted that many of his remarks would be applicable to trends within bioethics today: as scientific knowledge continues to expand and increase in accuracy and efficiency, fundamental questions of ethics and meaning often seem to get sidelined; science then is no longer at the service of the human person.

Director of a Viennese hospital and expert on medical law and ethics and, Dr. Johannes Meran highlighted the way that genetic techniques are permeating society. Not only are these methods used in the breeding of animals but there is now a âsubtle social pressureâ to undergo genetic testing and produce perfect offspring. Referring to the dramatic consequences of prenatal and pre-implantation diagnostics, Meran stated that the ethical

questions surrounding genetic techniques are often neglected in medical practice.

Dr. Gudrun Kulglér-Lang, former Director of World Youth Alliance-Europe, spoke of the legacy of ideas which treat the human being as something that can be used and discarded at will – i.e. ideas which deny inherent and inviolable dignity of every person. Quoting G. K. Chesterton, Kulglér-Lang built her statements upon a central theme of the evening conference: “Bad Ideas Kill”. She also mentioned plans that are being considered in Austria to introduce the e-card – a record of one’s medical history which would be presented to potential employers. This would prove problematic for jobseekers with specific medical conditions and such developments suggest an in-road of eugenics ideas beyond the scientific and medical sphere – posing a great threat to equal-opportunities and fundamental rights.

Prof. Hans Thomas, President of the Lindenthal-Institute, Cologne, described the historical manifestations of the Eugenics idea. Comparing the Nazi views on eugenics during the time before the Third Reich, he noted central arguments and ideas and drew analogies between contemporary discussions: “a relation to the old theories of happiness are re-appearing in today’s discussions”. Thomas commented on the opposition to Nazi ideas, which first of all came from “strong and uncompromising personalities” or from “religiously and mostly catholic motivated” persons. He suggested that “since the end of WWII, the new term for eugenics is human genetics”.

Dr Peter Liese MEP praised the work of the World Youth Alliance within the European Institutions. During his overview of the current debates taking place at the Institutions, Liese commented on the various positions adopted by different political groups, and highlighted some of the farcical arguments used in the bioethical discussions. During the question and answer session, Liese was keen to remind the audience of the potential for good developments within the field of human genetics.

General Hubertus Trauttenberg, President of the Caslte Hartheim Memorial, joined Liese in calling for a broader public discussion on the returning danger of eugenic tendencies in Europe. He commended the interest of the World Youth Alliance in the heroic young leaders of the Weisse Rose movement – leaders who courageously risked their lives resisting Nazi propaganda, whilst choosing instead to advocate for truth, freedom and dignity.

Those who attended the World Youth Alliance conference gained an ability to address the manifestations of eugenics in contemporary society. The speakers managed to articulate the issues and provide depth and clarity for those not familiar with the issue of eugenics. The World Youth Alliance was commended for its work within the European Institutions, and its recognition of the important ideas which inspired young people to dedicate their lives to the service of truth and dignity through active engagement of the resistance movements to National Socialism.

The strength of the WYA-Austrian committee was crucial in forming the foundations for this event. The leadership ability of Bernhard Rebernig and other committee members strongly reflects the reawakening of conscience exemplified by the Solidarnosc movement that emerged in the 1980s. The skill of the committee illustrated that the same traits of prudence, discretion, and an ability to work together are still fully functional amongst young people as they were in the members of the resistance movements and exemplified by the cultural leaders who

created the Solidarnosc movement a quarter of a Century ago. It is these skills that help to raise the voice of human dignity within today's social, professional, economic, cultural and political climate. These young people are living examples of how we can all work together to serve the truth within contemporary society.

“The young leaders of this generation are recognizing a need to inject something new and living into the culture so that the idea of human dignity is allowed to resonate with the experience of the human person and then become embedded in culture”

Emilia Klepacka

Conferences like this one put the ideas of human dignity back at the heart of culture and society, shaping the minds of all who participate and enabling them to understand the deadly legacy of ideas which denigrate the human person. World Youth Alliance – Europe is now looking for people to come on board and support its sub-regional initiatives in order to increase the frequency and impact of similar discussions across the continent.

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